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Spicy DETECTIVE STORIES



G-MAN
by
James A. Lawson

Illustrated

Spicy DETECTIVE STORIES



October, 1936

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By ALAN ANDERSON

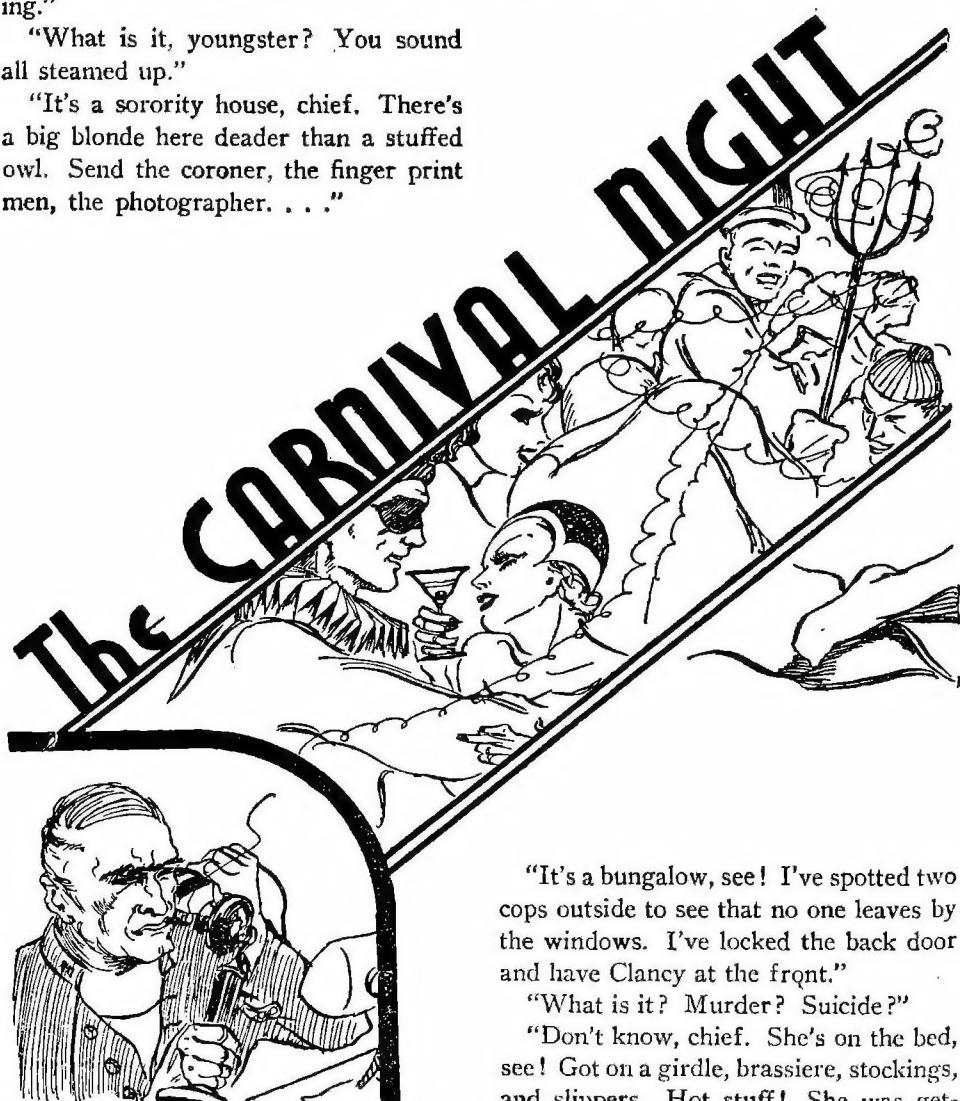
Murder isn't very pleasant . . . but investigating one in a sorority house full of lovely young girls promises as much pleasure as business. And Chris Norton finds danger over all

HELLO! Hello, chief! Sergeant Detective Norton of the homicide squad reporting."

"What is it, youngster? You sound all steamed up."

"It's a sorority house, chief. There's a big blonde here deader than a stuffed owl. Send the coroner, the finger print men, the photographer. . . ."

"Whoa! This is carnival night. Seven deaths already. You'll have to wait your turn. What have you done?"

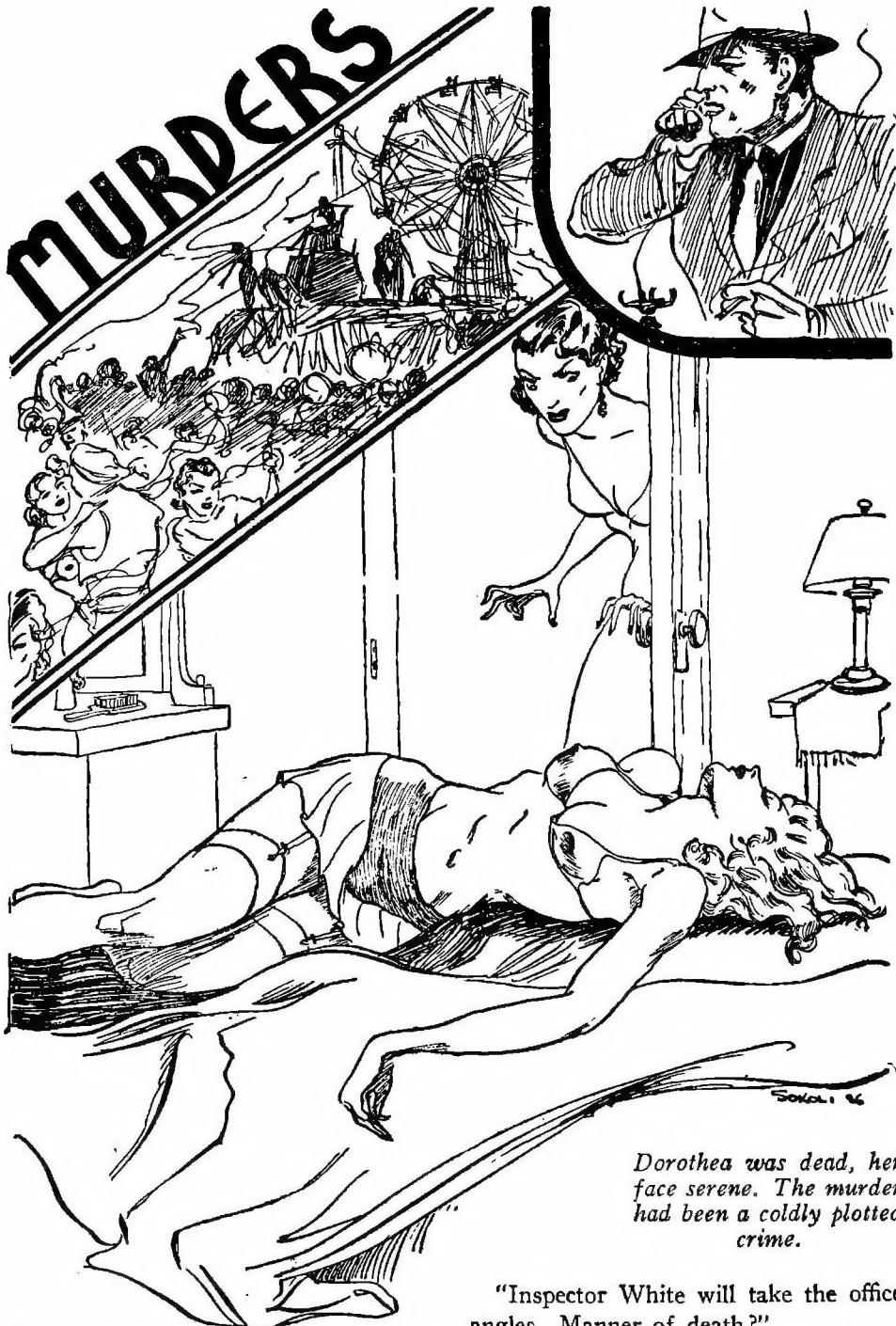


"It's a bungalow, see! I've spotted two cops outside to see that no one leaves by the windows. I've locked the back door and have Clancy at the front."

"What is it? Murder? Suicide?"

"Don't know, chief. She's on the bed, see! Got on a girdle, brassiere, stockings, and slippers. Hot stuff! She was get-

MURDERS



SOKOL '46

Dorothea was dead, her face serene. The murderer had been a coldly plotted crime.

ting ready to go to a dance. I figure she stretched out for a minute of rest when she croaked. Name's Dorothea Stewart. Check will you?"

"Inspector White will take the office angles. Manner of death?"

"Unknown. No marks or abrasions. Expression peaceful."

"When found?"

"Nine-thirty. By one of the girls who

called the police. Clancy was passing in a cruiser. He was here a minute later. The flash came out as he was passing the house."

"Okay. Do your best, Norton."

"Hey, chief! Send me a policewoman, will you? I may have to search one of these girls. Not that I'd mind doing it myself!"

"Sorry. None available."

"Make it two more men, chief. I ought to have someone guarding the murder room."

"Nix! Can't spare a man. Had to send sixty men to police that warehouse fire. Besides, they call you the Don Juan of the force. You should make out with the women."

"Okay! Okay! You've got trouble, I've got trouble. I'm taking a fistful of authority, see! I'll bust this case if I have to sign a confession myself."

"Go to it."

CHRIS NORTON slammed down the receiver and scammed out of the closet that housed the phone. He did not fulfill the popular conception of a detective. He was of average weight and height, uncommonly handsome and dressed like a Wall Street broker.

A glance assured him that Clancy was at the front door. He turned and went to the murder room.

Dorothea Stewart was on her left side in the center of the bed. She was a tall, heavy-set blonde, big-breasted and very attractive. Also she was very dead. Her left breast was mashed grotesquely against the mattress; the right had sagged to strain the encompassing brassiere. The girdle was so tight that a fold of flesh projected beyond its top. Her face was serene. Death had come without warning.

If it was murder, and he had a hunch that it was, it was a coldly plotted crime.

Chris glanced up to see a girl in the doorway watching him in morbid fascination. She was a tall red-head whose eyes were very brown, very expressive. She wore a white evening gown cut low in front and backless. It fitted her like the paper on the wall.

Chris covered the corpse with a light blanket at the foot of the bed and motioned the girl to enter. She did so gingerly. He set her at the desk facing the wall, and perched on one end of it. The superior elevation gave him a splendid view into the bosom of her gown. For a moment he stared at the deep valley of her breasts. She was neither slender nor fat but sort of, well, squashy. Nevertheless, his blood began racing.

"Your name?"

"Kay Doyle," she replied easily enough.

"Who found the body?"

"I did. Dorothea and I had late dates."

"Dance tonight?"

"The biggest of the year."

"Where's Miss Stewart's roommate?"

"Away. Home. Dorothea was rich. Her roommate wasn't. For doing themes and things Dorothea gave her enough money to go home weekends."

"You and Dorothea were double dating tonight?"

"Yes."

"You phoned as soon as you found the body?"

"Yes. What was I supposed to do? Have hysterics?"

She was defiant. A cool number here, he decided.

"Prior to the time you found the body was anyone in here?"

"Yes. Dorothea had a private bath. We all used it."

"Okay. Beat it!"

He watched the seductive motion of her receding hips as she left. Hell, the girl might have been murdered by any of the girls who'd used the bath. And most had left on dates before the body was discovered. Then too, an outsider might have stepped through the window and committed the murder, then left. A hell of a case. As tough a one as he'd ever handled.

He got out his notebook and itemized the contents of the room. On the vanity —powder, lipstick, rouge, perfume, and a rhinestone studded purse. On the desk —books, pens, pencils, and an odd dagger-like letter-opener. He opened a drawer of the vanity. Powder in varying shades. An assortment of lipstick from carmine to bright scarlet. A fingernail polishing kit. False eyelashes.

Why the variety? Then he got it. She used a different makeup for different occasions. Natural for the street, more exotic coloring for the soft lights of a dance. Nothing extraordinary about that. He knew plenty of women who did the same.

He went out in the corridor. There was a big negress there. Her round coal black face was wet with sweat and her eyes bulged. He knew better than to let her see the body.

"Your name?"

"Hanna Brown, Mr. Policeman. Please, mister, can I go away from here? I didn't have nothing to do with it. I been in town all day. When I come in a policeman says: 'You all gotta stay.'"

"Easy, Hanna! Just a couple of questions. You the maid here?"

"Yas, sir. I waits on tables too."

"How come you weren't here to serve dinner?"

"The gals had a banquet at the hotel,

mister. An' this is my day off. I just come back to tidy up a mite. Got me a date, mister."

"You'll have to stay awhile, Hanna. Is there a . . . a house mother here?"

"Yas, sir. I'll go fetch her."

She went down the hall as fast as her fat legs would carry her. In a minute a tall, hatchet-faced spinster appeared. She was calm, self-possessed. A woman, he figured, who'd make the girls toe the mark.

"Know anything about this?"

"Nothing whatsoever," she said in a domineering voice.

"Your name?"

"Mrs. Neff. I'm a widow. The girls had a sorority banquet. I fixed a snack for myself then went to my room. I stayed there until Miss Doyle told me of the tragedy."

"Any ideas?"

"No. She wouldn't commit suicide and no person would have a reason for killing her. Perhaps death was natural."

"I've seen Kay Doyle, Hanna Brown, and yourself. Anyone else in the house?"

"Lela Mills."

"Kay Doyle hadn't gone to the dance because she had a late date with Miss Stewart. Why hadn't Miss Mills gone?"

"I don't know," said the woman, "unless she didn't have a date."

Chris glanced at her shrewdly. Her expression told him as plainly as words that she had more to tell—plenty to tell.

"Is Miss Mills unattractive?"

"On the contrary, she's the most beautiful girl in the house."

"Man trouble, huh? Her boy friend stood her up? Who for?"

"For Miss Stewart," said the woman in a whisper.

"Was Miss Stewart popular with girls?"

"The most popular on the campus. Her room was always crowded with girls from other sororities."

CHRIS dismissed her. Four suspects. Mrs. Neff who'd taken subtle pains to point to another. Hanna Brown who might be a bald-faced liar. Lela Mills—jealousy there all right. And the red-headed Kay Doyle who'd found the body. Then any absent members of the sorority who'd been in the room after the banquet might be the murderess. Or anyone who might have stepped in the window from the outside. What a case!

He went out front and asked Clancy about Hanna Brown.

"She came in right after we did," Clancy said. "In fact when I was driving up the street I noticed her."

"Why did you notice her?"

"Because she's so fat."

The phone rang. Chris went and answered it. It was Inspector White.

"Say, Chris! The university has a dope sheet all students have to fill out. Home address, parents and all that. I've been checking by long distance."

"Uncover anything?"

"Plenty. All the information's phoney. No one in the town ever heard of her."

"That's bad," said Chris thoroughly mystified.

"Any angles you want worked?"

"How long has she been at the university?"

"A year."

"Call you back later," said Chris and hung up. He lighted a cigarette. Why would a co-ed want to conceal her real identity? He was going nuts.

There was a room roster by the front door. Chris went there and looked up Lela Mills's room number. The door between the entrance hall and the bedroom corridor he had left open so Clancy



could keep an eye on the murder room.

Lela Mills's room was at the end of the corridor. He tip toed there, turned the knob slowly and entered without having made a sound.

Lela Mills was standing in the center of the room facing the back wall. She had on little white silk panties; nothing more. She was tall, slender and the most beautifully formed woman he'd ever seen. He liked the long sweep of her legs and the gentle curve of her hips. He liked the firmness of her thighs and the neat taper of her calves. Her broad-shouldered back was a milky expanse of shimmering flesh and he liked that too. He wanted awfully much to see more.

"Turn around!" he snapped.

She did so. Her face was very beautiful and he liked the way her platinum blonde hair was piled on her head a compact mass of ringlets. Her stomach was boyishly flat and her high set breasts were firm little cups of glossy white flesh, small yet ripely feminine. Her blue eyes were startled.

With a shriek, she grabbed a robe and put it on. When she refaced him, she was poised, calm.

"Even a police officer could have the decency to knock."

"My apologies," he said. "But you happen to be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." He sighed. "Let's get down to cases. Your boy friend ditched you for Dorothea Stewart."

"So what? I kill her? Don't be absurd. He isn't the only man in the world."

Chris Norton's eyes took in the room. "There's a textbook on poisons on the desk."

"Why not? I'm taking advanced chemistry."

A cool number, all right. He wasn't,

*"So you were afraid I'd find out about that dope!"
he said.*



after ten minutes of questioning, getting anywhere. He wouldn't have stayed that long except it was nice to look at her; pleasant to hear the melodious sweetness of her voice.

HE LEFT and started to go to the murder room when two shots outside shattered the silence of the night. Running to the door he cautioned Clancy to remain and went outside. Private Terrel was stationed where he could see the front and one side of the bungalow. He stood there, a smoking revolver in his hand.

"Somebody tried to get into the murder room, Chris."

Norton got out his flashlight and advanced to where a body lay face down beneath the window. He turned the man over. A weasel-like face. He was shot neatly through the ear. A rat if there ever was one. Chris left him there.

"That ought to solve it," Terrel observed.

"I'm not so sure, not so sure," said Chris and went back into the bungalow.

Lela Mills and the spinsterish Mrs. Neff were reviving Hanna Brown who'd fainted in the corridor. Chris shooed them away and ordered them to their rooms. In a moment the maid revived. She was blubbering with terror. Chris helped her up and sent her to her quarters.

A nearby door opened. Kay Doyle stood there. Her brown eyes were misty and she swayed uncertainly. She nodded for him to enter. He did so.

The room was blue with smoke and a squat bottle sat on the table. Chris sniffed. Incense, no doubt. But no, a cigarette burned in a tray. A special brand, he decided.

Kay Doyle sat down and crossed her sturdy legs.

"Have a drink?" she inquired and waved at the bottle.

"No thanks. Anything to tell me?"

"Nothing except that Mrs. Neff hated Dorothea's guts."

"Why?"

"Once when Dorothea was drunk she slapped Mrs. Neff's face in front of everyone. She never forgot it."

"I can see that she wouldn't," said Chris dryly. That was true. Mrs. Neff was not the sort to forgive or forget. And her character was revengeful.

Kay Doyle staggered over, closed the door and locked it. Then she leaned against the frame and watched him with narrowed eyes. Her breathing intensified until her breasts rose and fell. She began trembling.

"What's the idea?" Chris asked.

"You're cute," she said and wet her lips. "Awfully cute. Aren't I attractive?"

"Very," he admitted.

"Would you like to see more of me?"

"Sure. We'll have a date sometime."

"I mean now. Right now!"

Then she amazed him by shrugging down the shoulders of her evening gown. With a deft twist of the hips, it slithered to the floor and lay in gleaming folds. Chris's mind spun. What was it? A trick? A plan to keep him there?

But his eyes drank in the seductive lines of her ample body. Rounded breasts straining against a wispy brassiere. Tiny lace step-ins that stretched to encompass curved hips. Legs sturdy but well shaped. Plump thighs.

He was suspicious. He started toward the door. His hands went to her shoulders as he tried to shove her aside. Instantly her bare arms circled his waist and she pulled him against her—hard.

A vivid mouth was raised. He looked down at her face.

Then he kissed her. Her arms tensed. Her lips were crushed greedily to his mouth. She strained against him. Her heavy breathing caused the brassiere to snap. It fell from one shoulder. Cream-tinted, rounded flesh was hot against him.

Chris Norton was sunk, and knew it. If she were holding him there while a fiend murdered everyone in the house, he couldn't have stopped. Not then.

SOMETIMES later he left. Kay Doyle was at the table drinking. The corridor was deserted. Clancy was at the door. The policeman gestured to Chris. He went there.

"A telegram for Miss Stewart."

Chris opened it. It was in code! Hell, a coed getting a message in code. But was she really a coed? He doubted it. Then what was she? He was going screwy. A murder. Any number of suspects. And he didn't even know the agency of death.

Why had that rat-faced tramp tried to get to the room?

Then he cursed his stupidity. To regain possession of the murder weapon, of course!

He went to the room and gave it a thorough, half hour search. Nothing, absolutely nothing. Disheartened, he left there and tip-toed down the corridor. He'd see Mrs. Neff and see if he could break down her armor of defiance.

Kay Doyle's door was open. He glanced idly in, then froze with fear.

She stood there clutching, with her left hand, a robe whose vee neck dipped into the valley of her breasts. Her face was livid with fury; her eyes glazed. Never had he seen so attractive a face made ugly with madness.

Her right hand held an automatic! The muzzle was aimed at his head.

He was face to face with death, and knew it. He was tense. Motionless. He watched her lips part in a mirthless grin. His nerves tingled. His eyes riveted on her trigger finger.

When he saw it flex, he jerked his head to one side. The pistol roared. The slug cut a furrow in the hair on the side of his head, knicked an ear and thudded into the wall.

There wasn't time to think. He just acted. There was a stand there. On it a vase. He snatched it up and in the same motion hurled it at her. It struck her gun arm and half spun her. The pistol lowered.

He leaped forward with his fist cocked. He cracked her a hard one on the jaw. She fell back and lay face up on the floor. She was out cold. Would be for a while.

Lela Mills and Mrs. Neff came into the corridor. At the far end Hanna Brown's black face peered from behind a door. A face dominated by eyes ready to pop from their sockets.

"Get back to your rooms!" he ordered.

They turned away. He then faced Clancy who had his revolver out, and nodded that everything was okay. Then he entered the room and took the pistol.

"Things are beginning to shape up," he told the inert figure on the floor. "Yes, sir, things are shaping up. You gave the show away, sweetheart."

He carted her to the bed and searched the room. Then he went out. His discovery would make a plenty big stink.

He still didn't know the murderer. Or how Dorothea Stewart had been bumped off. He went into the murder room. If there were only a clue! Again he stood thinking. He knew now that Dorothea

Stewart had been more than a simple coed. That fact explained the murder. But who was it and how had it been done?

Lela Mills came up.

"You're hurt," she said. "Come to my room. I'll fix you up the best I can."

IN HER room she set him on a chair, got a towel and began blotting the blood from the side of his head. Absorbed, she did not notice that her robe had opened to reveal the long perfection of her intensely white legs. He fought the impulse to reach out and smooth down a supple thigh. The perfume of her made him dizzy. Her palpitating nearness was whipping his blood to fever heat.

"Chris!" called Clancy from the door.

He bounded out into the corridor. Two young men were at the door. Both were pale and frightened so he knew Clancy had explained his presence there.

"These guys had dates," Clancy said.

"Who had a date with Miss Stewart?"

"I . . . I did," said one. "I'm Roger Barnes."

The guy was all shot to hell. Chris took his arm and steered him to the living room. He turned back to Clancy.

"Keep your eye on the other fellow."

"I can't believe it," said Roger Barnes.

"I'm not going to pull my punches," Chris told him. "Dorothea Stewart gave her roommate money to go home weekends so you could sneak through the window and stay with her."

"Why not? She was my wife."

"Oh," Chris said. "Oh!"

That fitted in with everything so far—fitted in perfectly. He left Barnes there and went into the hallway. Clancy had his head stuck in the card room watching the other fellow.

"A woman came in with them, Chris. I don't know where she went."

His heart pounding, Chris Norton ran down to the murder room. He entered. A cute little girl turned, looked at him and smiled.

"Dorothea's drunk again."

"Didn't you hear what the policeman said?" Chris demanded.

"No. He stopped the boys. I came on back."

Then her eyes widened. She started to speak, let out a little moan and suddenly went limp. Chris caught her. He was sick with dread. *May as well face the facts.*

The girl was dead!

He put her on the floor and stood staring down at her. What had she done there? What would be the first thing any girl would do?

THEN he got it! With appalling simplicity he saw through the whole fiendish plot. The facts sobered him. He was dealing with brains.

But he had yet to discover the murderer!

This last accidental killing proved that the murderer would redouble efforts to regain the murder weapon. Chris felt the chill of fear. His life wasn't worth two cents.

He switched off the lights, shoved the body of the newcomer under the bed, and quickly rearranged the vanity. Then he went to the window and looked out. The rat-faced corpse was still outside. He wished the coroner and the morgue wagon would hurry up and get there. He went to the desk and turned on the lamp. He adjusted the shade so the corpse outside could not be seen. Then he went out and talked to Clancy with his back toward the corridor.

"We talk, see!" he said. "We talk

until you see someone peek into the corridor."

"A door's opening a little now."

"Who is it?"

"Can't see."

"Look at me! Now I'm going out. When I do, you take these men into the living room and stay there. I want to give someone an opportunity to get to

the murder room without being seen."

He went out and circled the bungalow. He went to the window of the murder room and crouched there. He steadied himself by putting his hands on the sill. Minutes passed. He began to sweat.

Chris didn't like to do it—but he popped her a stiff one on the button. The gun dropped.



He could see into the corridor, all right.

Then Mrs. Neff appeared! She glanced furtively up and down the hallway, then entered the room. Lela Mills and Kay Doyle slipped in too. They whispered excitedly. Then the fat, black Hanna Brown came in. They formed in a group and began to whisper.

What they did next would tell the story!

Then a hot, searing pain shot through his left hand and the concrete sill cracked. Something thudded into the earth at his feet. Then the window pane shattered.

He dropped and whipped out his long-barreled .35 revolver. He was in the shadows now. He stared at the opposite house until his eyes watered.

Then he saw it! A man on the roof was aiming a silenced rifle. Chris had the .35 up now. Carefully he sighted the man's head along the luminous sights. He steadied, then gently squeezed the trigger. The revolver roared and kicked his wrist up and back. The man on the roof jerked erect, half spun and fell.

Chris, shaking like a leaf, got up. His left hand was neatly shot through the back. He stared at it. A .22 he guessed. He moved his fingers. No bones broken. His hand was numb. He tied it with a handkerchief.

"All right, Chris?" called Terrel in concern.

"Yes. Go in and tell Clancy to take the four women to the card room."

Chris whistled for the man watching the back. He came running up.

"Go up on the roof of that house and tell me what you find."

The man departed. Chris entered the bungalow. Clancy had the women in the card room. Mrs. Neff was calm and icy. Lela Mills seemed calm but was very

pale. The red-headed Kay Doyle was shaking like a leaf. Hanna Brown was wailing and wringing her hands. Chris stood there a minute watching them, then went to the murder room. He pilfered the drawer of the vanity and returned.

"Ladies," he said, "I have a little experiment to perform. Mrs. Neff, will you step up?"

She did so. He pulled out a lipstick and smeared her lips.

"Don't wet your lips!" he warned her.

Kay Doyle was next. He painted her mouth and repeated the warning. She was shot to hell. She stumbled to a chair and sat down. Lela Mills seemed more puzzled than anything. Hanna Brown wailed and pleaded. Her face was wet with sweat after he applied the lipstick.

"Now, ladies," he ordered, "please wet your lips."

LE LA MILLS was the first. She did so thoughtfully. Mrs. Neff ran an experimental tongue about her mouth with her expression plainly disdainful.

"Miss Doyle," said Chris, "you too."

The red-head seemed dazed. But she wet her lips.

"And now Hanna."

The maid was transfixed with horror. She tried to smile and couldn't. Then with a scream of terror, she pulled up her apron and rubbed the stuff away as if it were an agonizing acid eating her mouth away. She began to scream and fell to her knees. Then she fainted.

"Take her away and book her for murder, Clancy!" Chris ordered.

But it took Terrel and Clancy to carry that bulk from the room. Chris turned to the others.

"You're free to go now."

They departed in silence. He went

out to the hallway. The man he'd sent next door came in.

"Geez, Chris! Right through the eye. He's deader than hell. Had earphones on. A wire was stretched from there to the roof of this house."

Terrel came in.

"Clancy took her down in the cruiser. Inspector White and the coroner just drove up."

The coroner, who was a physician, dressed Chris's hand. By the time he'd finished his assistants had removed the bodies.

"The women are a job for the toxicologist, coroner."

"Poison, eh?" he said, then added: "I'll make a note of it. Well, got to run."

"Good work, Chris," said the elderly Inspector White. "How'd you do it?"

Chris took him to Kay Doyle's room. She was just leaving and was too shame-faced to look at them. Chris closed the door and helped himself to a lavish drink.

"Dorothea Stewart," Chris explained, "was a member of a dope ring planted here to bring in new customers. These girls have money, see! They probably paid plenty for the stuff."

He opened a desk drawer and took out a pack of cigarettes. White sniffed one.

"By gad! Reefers. How did you spot them?"

"This Doyle girl. I smelled it, see! Then she wanted to neck. Later she tried to kill me."

"Right! First they promote passion, then the lust to kill."

"That tied in with Stewart's phony dope sheet."

"But why murder?"

"Stewart gave her roommate money to go home weekends. I smelled a man

right away. Would the ring want her to get thick with a man? Never! Then I suspected that she was knocking down plenty and planned to run off with her husband and start all over."

"She married him?"

"Yes. The ring got suspicious. They sent this Hanna Brown to watch her. They bribed the other maid to quit, I suppose. She found out plenty. They decided to bump Stewart off."

"How?"

"The slickest way possible. Brown watched Stewart, see! Learned her habits. Well, she used different makeup for different gowns. Brown would know what gown she'd wear tonight and that she'd use a bright lipstick. She poisoned the lipstick this morning knowing it wouldn't be used until night."

"Then what?"

"Then she stayed away and had an alibi. The guy on the roof next door had the phone tapped. Well, as soon as someone phoned of the death, he'd signal Hanna Brown who'd come in, get the lipstick and destroy it and still have a perfect alibi. By a lucky break Clancy was right outside when the radio flash went out. He beat her here!"

Inspector White was writing it down.

"THE second death provided the means of discovering the weapon. I figured that the girl would perhaps go to the vanity and power. Then I saw that she'd used that unusually bright lipstick. Dorothea Stewart had that shade on too. I figure it was a poison that had to touch the tongue. She put it on, stretched out on the bed then swished her lips with her tongue."

"Wasn't that a risk to poison the lipstick in the morning?"

(Continued on page 116)

A STORY of HATE



*As Strawn entered
the girl was on the
table dancing furiously.*

She crossed her legs as she fumbled through her purse for a jeweled lighter. Strawn, behind the battered desk, swallowed hard and viewed the sleek, well-filled chiffon with misgivings. How deliberate was it? Did she mean to arouse him? Twin streamers of smoke funneled from her nostrils.

An EYE for

Strawn didn't like the case—playing nursemaid to protect a fat man! But then there was the girl's fear . . . He couldn't dismiss the danger to her



He shifted uneasily as she leaned toward him, revealing the shadowy cleft between rounded breasts. A manicured nail tapped the desk.

"The main thing, Mr. Strawn, is to keep this from my husband, Mr. Hempfer. He has heart trouble, you know, and the doctor is afraid any small shock might prove fatal. If you'll—"

The phone rang three times before Strawn could rouse himself from the



spectacle before him. With a muttered apology he picked up the offending instrument, managed a mild hello. The voice that came to him was throaty.

"Strawn? Victor Strawn, the detective?"

Strawn grunted assent.

"Sometime today you'll get a call from a woman who will be wearing a black silk dress, silver fox furs, and a hat with a silver buckle on the left hand

An EYE

By CARL
MOORE

side. This woman will try to engage you to do a piece of work."

Strawn looked across his desk at the woman who smoked opposite him, swept his eyes over her voluptuously rounded, mature figure. There was a gleaming silver buckle on the left hand side of the small hat.

"So what?" he said softly.

"Just this," said the deep voice. "If you will refuse the case, tomorrow morning when you reach your office, you will find one thousand dollars in cash stuck through your mail slot. There are no strings attached, Strawn. Simply refuse to talk with her."

"And if I don't? If I take the case?"

"You'll live just long enough to regret it." The receiver clicked.

STRAWN smiled and hung up his own receiver. Again the woman crossed her legs. This time several inches of gleaming flesh showed above the tops of the chiffon stockings. Strawn tore his eyes away with an effort.

"Your fee doesn't matter," she said, "as long as we understand each other. Mr. Hempfer isn't to know, isn't to suspect that anything is wrong."

Strawn lit a cigarette himself, grinned a little feebly. He looked at the letter that lay before him on the desk. It read:

"Hempfer: We are desperate men. Have ten grand in small bills ready at your house for immediate use. We will get in touch with you. Fail to do this or call in the police and we will kidnap your child if we have to follow her to hell.—Five."

"This," he said slowly, "is just a crank letter. I don't believe there's anything to be alarmed about. So you might as well save yourself my fee and just forget the whole thing."

She arose and paced the floor, her hips liquid and provocative, making his eyes hot. There was appeal in her eyes as she turned.

"It's serious to me, Mr. Strawn. It's the third one we've received. With my husband in the shape he's in, I can't afford to let anything happen to Maureen. He loves her so dearly. Somehow I didn't think you'd refuse me. Won't you please help me—me?"

Her hand was on his arm, tugging him to his feet. Her face was close to his. For a moment he hesitated. "Lady," he said slowly, "I'd like to do it—for you. But do you realize that I've got a reputation as the toughest private dick west of New York? They'd laugh me out of town if they found I'd hired out as nursemaid to somebody's kid. Why—"

"Please," she said softly, "for me. Just come out to the house. Please. It will be pleasant for you."

She was very close to him, her eyes a challenge as well as a promise, the rise and fall of her breasts almost brushing his shirt front. Hot blood raced in Strawn's veins. After all he was young, in spite of his reputation for toughness.

He said, "All right," huskily. Almost she kissed him, but with a little smile turned and picked up her gloves.

DURING the cab ride to the Hempfer estate, Strawn turned the thing over and over in his mind and kicked himself time and again. Vic Strawn, toughest dick in town, nemesis of murderers and hardened criminals, taking a nursemaid case based on a nut extortion letter! Bitterly he eyed the woman beside him, noted the lithe maturity of her, the challenging charm, and made up his mind that his fee for this bit of foolishness would be in proportion to his mental anguish and the kidding he would

receive if the thing ever came out. And, he grinned to himself, the fee wouldn't be entirely in cash!

The cab wheeled into the Hempfer grounds and the mansion loomed up before them. Strawn chuckled thinking how much the rambling house looked like one of Hempfer's own products. August Hempfer, the sausage king, who had made millions out of his succulent pork delicacies!

Mrs. Rose Hempfer had gushed all the way to the mansion. Now she grasped Strawn's arm firmly in both of her hands as if afraid he would refuse at the last moment. It was unnecessary. He was all too conscious of the soft breast that burned against his elbow, the firm hip that brushed his as they walked up the steps.

The door swung open before they arrived. Strawn looked surprised. Mrs. Hempfer gushed on, led him inside. Three steps in the hallway and Strawn whirled, frightened. His hand instinctively sought the butt of the big gun that nestled beneath his left arm. Mrs. Hempfer giggled.

"That's only Tomano, silly," she scoffed.

Strawn gazed wide-eyed at the man who had let them into the house. Slowly, almost reluctantly his fingers relaxed from the gun butt.

Tomano was approximately five feet in height and approximately the same footage in width. He was black, as black as the inside of a hat on a dark night. The only thing about his wooden face that denoted life, as he bowed and scraped before his mistress, was his eyes. They were like live red coals in a dead fire of charcoal. There was no welcoming smile on his thick lips, no expression of greeting—merely a fiery glow in his eyes.

Strawn shuddered and walked a few feet down the hallway after Mrs. Hempfer. Two spots in his back burned—as if those coal-like eyes were actually laid against the twitching flesh. From somewhere in the house he was aware of the pulse and throb of wild, jazz music.

"And this," said the elegant lady coyly, "is Dr. Mason."

Strawn brought himself back to reality with an effort. Dr. Mason was approximately six feet six in height and the same number of inches in width. He advanced with hand extended. To Strawn the fingers felt like a handful of wet tripe. He murmured a polite greeting, the best he could manage, and tried to tear himself away from the doctor's probing eyes.

The man might possess the features of a death's head, might be the exact antithesis of Tomano as far as physical points were concerned, but his eyes were *exactly the same*. Two lidless, red-rimmed globes of fire that burned and glared.

"Dr. Mason," explained the coy Mrs. Hempfer over cocktails, "is Mr. Hempfer's physician. Doctor, I wish you would explain my husband's condition to Mr. Strawn."

Strawn protested but as he sipped his drink he heard—he had to hear. The doctor's voice was thick and throaty, penetrating. The only thing that distracted Strawn's attention was the sound of the jazz music coming from somewhere down the hallway.

Eventually he managed stiffly, "Mrs. Hempfer if I'm to be a nursemaid, I better have a look at the baby. What do you think?"

WITHOUT a word of protest she took his arm, led him from the room and down the hallway. The sound

of music grew stronger, plainer. The hand on his arm was caressing, her hip brushed his, her full breast frankly pushed against his shoulder. Strawn began to get ideas.

Before velvet portieres she paused. From behind them came the roar of radio music. "I want you to meet August," she said. "Now not a word of your real purpose in being here." He nodded, she thrust aside a curtain.

On a huge library table at the end of the room, illuminated by soft overhead lights, a girl was dancing. Fascinated, Strawn watched while she abandoned herself to the mad rhythm of the music. Higher and higher, manicured fingers pulled a scanty skirt, past rounded, chiffon knees, past a gleaming expanse of white, quivering flesh, past a tiny triangle of black sheer chiffon, until the belt of the gown barred the disclosure. Legs ground and capered, knees wove and interwove, tapering thighs quivered and vibrated.

Strawn held his breath, looked into two challenging, mocking eyes, glimpsed the dark cleft between arrogant, dancing breasts as the dancer kept mad time to madder music. Reluctantly he tore his eyes away, saw a pudgy figure sitting before the fireplace a bottle of beer in one hand and a sandwich in the other. The fat man turned and beamed like a pleased pig.

"This is my husband, Mr. Hempfer," said Mrs. Hempfer, gushing as usual, "and August, this is Mr. Strawn, a friend of your doctor."

There was no expression in Mr. Hempfer's pig set eyes as he extended a pudgy hand. He said, "Have a bottle of beer. She's cute, ain't she? She's truckin'."

Speechless Vic Strawn stood there

while the girl finished her dance, while the wild music of the melody changed to a harmless station announcement. He saw the billowing skirt as she leaped from the table, saw the vibration of her young breasts, the swagger of young hips as she ran toward the man who sat in a three-man chair before the fireplace.

She kissed him atop the bald head, received his pat of approbation in beaming silence, then sank down onto the arm of his chair, eight dollars' worth of chiffon hoisery waving in the air. She grinned coyly at Vic Strawn.

August Hempfer grunted, waved a fat hand at his far side, "Meet Cecil," he said, "Lord Chidester, Mr. Strawn."

Cecil, Lord Chidester, unfolded himself from the shadows, screwed a monocle in his eye and muttered, "How do?"

"And this," said Mrs. Hempfer stiffly, "is my stepdaughter, Maureen."

VIC STRAWN gulped, returned the challenging nod of baby's head and murmured something trite and commonplace. Before he could protest, the girl had him by the arm leading him to a deep windowseat on the opposite side of the room. He gulped his beer warily, conscious of the pig eyes of Mr. Hempfer, the angry eyes of Mrs. Hempfer on the scene.

"I'm glad you came," she half whispered in his ear, tugging at her shoulder-straps. "I've heard all about you, of course, and I've always wanted to meet a famous detective."

He grinned, gulped at his beer. The music started again. "Dance with me," she mocked and took the glass from his hand to place it on the window seat. Slowly she drew him to his feet. For a moment they stood poised there, his arms half about her, her own arm about



his shoulder, while her hot eyes burned into his.

He was conscious, all too conscious of warm breasts close to his chest, of soft turned hips brushing him. Conscious, too, of the eyes of her parents, he knew this was not the thing to do.

"Psssst." From the doorway, Over Maureen's rounded shoulder he saw the death's head mask of Dr. Mason in the

doorway. A skinny finger beckoned imperatively. With a muttered word of excuse he tore himself away, nodded toward the sausage king, and Lord Chidester, made the doorway closely followed by Mrs. Hempfer.

Dr. Mason trotted ahead of them toward the living room. Mrs. Hempfer pressed his arm closely, pressed her body against his moving muscles. "Do you think," she panted, "that Maureen is more attractive than I?" There was jealousy as well as man-hunger in her voice.

They were at the living room before he could concoct a suitable answer. Dr. Mason looked mysterious, raised a finger again to his lips.

"The demand has come," he whispered. "We must not let Mr. Hempfer know. The shock will kill him." Wordlessly he handed the detective another note. "Just thrust beneath the door," he whispered again.

THIS note was in the same hen-scratch, almost undecipherable scrawl as the first that Strawn had seen.

"Hempfer: Start your emissary out the Old Mill road within half an hour with the money as instructed. If he is followed or observed, the deal is off. He will be contacted. Have him wait exactly one hour at the Old Mill, no more, no less.—Five."

That was that. Strawn said, "What do we do now?"

"Do?" half screamed Mrs. Hempfer. "We give you the money, and you start out. I'd rather pay it than have Mr. Hempfer worried. The shock might cost his life!"

Strawn shrugged. If these people wanted to pay ten grand on a nut extortion letter it was no hair off his back! While Mrs. Hempfer fumbled nervous-

ly at a wall safe, he compared the new note to the one she had given him at his office. The handwriting was undoubtedly the same—the same almost unreadable scrawl, not so much illiterate as hurried. Thoughtfully he rubbed his fingers—hard—over the latest note. Several of the letters smeared.

Ten minutes later he sat in the seat of an immense roadster, his fingers gripping the wheel while he listened to the last words of instructions from Mrs. Hempfer. She stood on the running board leaning inside the car, the cleft between her rising and falling breasts distinct and breathtaking. Her long fingers gripped his shoulders.

"And you mustn't let anything go wrong," she concluded. "As soon as it's over, come back here and—I'll be alone!"

He grinned, patted her hand, felt the long fingers grip his own tightly and slid the car into gear. The long low car drifted easily down the gravel drive, the swish of the oversize tires making more noise than the motor. Suddenly he applied the brakes. From the shrubbery stepped a figure in a brown tweed coat, directly into the car's path, hand raised in an imperious gesture.

He stopped the car.

The door clicked as she twisted the knob, entered the roadster, and sank on the seat beside him. "What the hell!" he began. It was the baby, Maureen herself.

She smiled enigmatically. "Thought I wouldn't catch you, big boy. Didn't even have time to dress!"

She opened the tweed coat wide, eyed him appraisingly. Blood mounted to Strawn's cheeks. Beneath the coat she wore a dance set, a black-net brassiere that accented rather than shielded her

impudent breasts, and a pair of skin-tight panties to match, that nestled lovingly about her rounded hips.

"What do you want, kid?" he spoke hoarsely.

"I'm going with you," she said calmly. "There's something screwy going on here and I don't want any part of it."

He argued, he expostulated, all to no avail. She insisted on accompanying him.

"I know exactly what's going on," she argued, "but I'm no chump even if you can't read between the lines. It isn't kidnapers I'm afraid of! It's that precious stepmother of mine and her skinny boy friend! The safest place for me is with you for it's the last place they'll try to find me."

"And what of Lord Helpus?"

"That fink? He's about as much use as a telescope in a zero-zero fog. Nope. I'm going with you."

The argument continued while moments ticked away. She tried wiles, sex appeal—everything known to woman. Still Strawn's training held him adamant. Eventually he opened the door. "I've got a client, baby," he said gruffly, "and it's your stepmother. When I take this jack out and deliver it successfully, I'll come back and take your case up—if you've got a case, which I seriously doubt. I think you've got a persecution complex."

"It's just that you like her better than you do me," sobbed the girl beside him. The tweed coat gaped open, revealing velvet smooth skin, soft flesh that quivered and throbbed seductively as she cried on his shoulder. Somehow his arm crept about her white roundness, his fingers sought and found throbbing, velvety flesh.

"I'll be back," he managed, and kissed

her. Her lips clung to his, hot and moist. But, with an effort, he finally pushed her away.

WITHOUT another word she got out and Vic Strawn, private detective, rode away into the evening shadows cursing himself for a fool. What the hell had he gotten into now. Nursemaid! A dame afraid of nut letters, willing to pay ten grand to keep her three hundred pound husband from having heart failure, and a younger dame, a stepdaughter mouthing something about being afraid of her own mother! It didn't make sense!

The Old Mill Road was crowded with commuters; traffic was thick. Nevertheless Strawn managed it, managed to make the Old Mill itself in less than an hour. Oblivious of everything, he parked there and lit a cigarette, his eyes reverting time and time again to the packaged money on the seat beside him.

How would the extortionists contact? Would they drive up and speak to him? He touched the butt of the gun beneath his arm lovingly and shook his head. That wouldn't be the time for it! To earn his fee, he had merely to deliver the money. There were no instructions as to what might follow!

Thirty minutes, forty, forty-five. Still no contact. He lit the eighth cigarette, puffed viciously at the paper cylinder. Exactly sixty minutes after his arrival he turned the car around into traffic, wheeled back toward the Hempfer mansion with a grim set to his jaw. The money in the brown paper package still lay on the seat beside him.

Back through the even thicker traffic he wheeled, trying to make head and tails of the whole affair. What kind of extortionist was it who failed to show

up to gain ten grand of easy money? And what did Maureen Hempfer mean when she said she knew her life was in danger? Why should her life be in danger when her folks, her mother to be specific, was willing to pay the money demanded by the nut extortionist?

FROM the next hill the Hempfer house was a blaze of light. Every window, every doorway seemed to pour its brilliance into the murky blackness of the night. Hunch, instinct, the deep-grained suspicion of the hardened man-hunter prompted Strawn's next move. He parked the car outside the hedged driveway and walked up the gravel expanse silently and softly.

Halfway to the house he paused. A thick mist, almost a rain had set in, as impenetrable as heavy fog. In the distance he saw the eerie circle cast by a moving light. It seemed to be centering around the front door of the mansion, casting about weirdly as if the wielder were searching for something. Strawn crouched in the bushes, trying to make out who held the light.

Some twenty feet away a branch crackled, leaves fluttered. Soundlessly Strawn crouched in the shrubbery. Then a moan, a long low groan of agony, the muffled crash of a falling body. In the distance the weird circle of the flashlight still played about the wet shrubbery. Softly Strawn made toward the last sound. Again the groan. He parted the bushes, made out the dim outlines of a man's figure half hidden by the protective bushes.

"Ah, God!" groaned the fallen figure. Quickly Strawn leaned to him. He shuddered as the glare of his shielded match illuminated the features of Lord Chidester. A tremendous gash came

from the man's scalp down onto his forehead, almost to his eyebrow. His mouth was twisted and contorted with the pain of the still bleeding wound.

Strawn wiped the blood away with a damp handkerchief, his mouth grim. Chidester seemed to sense that he was in the hands of a friend for his own hands gripped the lapels of Strawn's coat convulsively. His words came with an effort.

"Mason! Mason and the woman!" he gasped. "I caught them trying to murder Hempfer with a hypo of some kind. He was already drugged, already asleep and I caught them slipping up on him. Mason hit me with a poker. Hurry man, hurry. They'll kill him!"

He sighed, his body stiffened. Slowly the hands that gripped Strawn's lapels relaxed. The mouth sagged open, the body trembled convulsively once again and Cecil, Lord Chidester, was dead.

Grimly Strawn arose, gazed toward the lighted house. He was beginning to see the whole layout now, beginning to realize why the supposed extortionists had not appeared to get the ten thousand dollars he had carried to them. On cautious feet he went toward the mansion. The faint, eerie circle of the flashlight was disappearing around the east side of the house. Some hundred feet behind Strawn followed, until he came to the French doors that led into the living room. The light continued on its searching way; Strawn tiptoed onto the veranda.

Cautiously he crouched in the shadows peering into the room. He caught his breath. Mrs. Hempfer was smoking furiously in an armchair before the fire. Her red fingernails beat a tattoo on the chair arm while her angry eyes watched



the thin figure of Dr. Mason as he paced back and forth before her. Strawn could not hear their conversation.

Suddenly Mason paused before the woman, seemed to be speaking in a commanding fashion. From his point of vantage Strawn caught a glimpse of the

The lancet quivered beside his head, and despite her trance, the girl fought like a tigress, clawing, scratching...

man's eyes. They were narrowed, intense, more burning than ever. Like a bird fascinated by a snake, Mrs. Hempfer watched him. The cigarette fell unheeded from her long fingers. Slowly she arose, moved toward him like a woman in a trance. Straight to him she walked, her eyes on his, her breasts swaying and quivering, the curves of her legs revealing themselves through her thin dress with every stride. With a glow of triumph in his eyes, Mason enfolded her in his arms.

Strawn shuddered as he saw skeleton hands fumbling at the shoulder straps of a gown, saw fingers probe and pry possessively into white flesh. The woman seemed like one in a dream, a trance. The grinning death's head leaned to press its purple lips against her mouth, then suddenly drew away to hold her at arm's length.

A bony hand darted into a pocket, came out with glittering steel. The slender lancet was suddenly thrust into the tapering hand of the woman. The skeleton leaned close to whisper instructions into her ear.

Strawn remembered the words of the dying Lord Chidester and burst through the French doorways, a grim smile on his lips.

"Well," he said, as Dr. Mason turned snarling, "I'm back." The woman continued on her way without turning her head. Strawn said, "Wait, Mrs. Hempfer!"

Dr. Mason snatched again at his pocket. His hand emerged with a twin lancet to the one the woman held. He drew back his arm as if to hurl it and Strawn heaved the brown paper package of money right into his face. The string burst.

Bills flew like feathers from a rup-

tured pillow but the man's aim was deflected. The lancet quivered into the wood beside Vic Strawn's head as he bounded toward the skeleton physician. His right hand crashed against the bony chin; Mason collapsed. Strawn stepped over him, hurried after the woman as she disappeared into the hallway.

He seized her wrist, practically hurled her back into the room and before she could recover her balance was wresting the steel from her hands. In spite of her trance, she fought like a tigress, twisting, turning, kicking and clawing with her free hand. Again and again sharp nails raked Strawn's face, drawing blood, stinging, burning. Her dress ripped, breasts came suddenly almost free, to sway and vibrate as she fought. There was one thing to do and one alone. In spite of his dislike for the task, Strawn crashed another brutal right against her jaw. She joined the inert doctor on the floor, unconscious.

STRAWN tore down the hallway to the library. The huge chair where Hempfer had sat was empty. He remembered the man's heart disease, decided not to yell. No doubt he was past hearing anyway. The sound of a moan from the living room brought him back there. Mrs. Hempfer was sitting up, oblivious of the skirt whose hem was in her lap, revealing areas of gleaming flesh, oblivious of torn shoulder straps that left her half naked on the floor. She looked up stupidly at Strawn who strode past her to prod the doctor to his feet with a sharp toe. Strawn's brown fist held a businesslike gun.

"Okay, folks," he said grimly, "it's all over. I've found Chidester and I'm just getting ready to call in the police. I was to be the alibi, the fall guy, eh?"

Pretty smart! Because I've got a good rep with the cops, my word wouldn't be questioned. You, Mrs. Hempfer, and your lover here, planned to do away with both Mr. Hempfer and his daughter. The girl was supposed to be kidnaped—my word would corroborate that with the police—and the shock was supposed to kill Mr. Hempfer. How long have you been building up that heart disease alibi, Mason?"

Mason snarled.

"Well, it didn't work. Chidester is dead and you've got a murder rap to face. Now what have you done with the others—knocked them off, too?"

The only sound in the room was the terrified sobbing of the shameless, half naked woman on the floor. Mason glared his defiance.

"Okay. If you won't talk to me, maybe you'll talk to the homicide squad." He reached for the phone.

"Wait, Strawn. Just a minute!"

Thunderstruck, Strawn gazed at the doorway. There, outlined against the velvet hangings was the piglike figure of August Hempfer, a huge automatic in his hand.

"This is no job for the police," he said, his little eyes burning like fire. "Oh, I'm no fool. I've been onto their game for months. Ever since Mason diagnosed my bellyache as heart trouble! I simply wanted to see how far they'd go with it. They got the best of me tonight for a little while, put something in my beer, but Mason, did you think for a minute that hypo you gave me hurt me? Every bottle of medicine in your kit was emptied ten minutes after you came in and colored water substituted."

He paused for breath. The woman whimpered from the floor. Strawn said,

"Chidester is dead, Hempfer. I'm calling the police." Again he reached for the phone.

The fat man said, "Tomano!" Strawn whirled, but too late. He was aware of the squat black man behind him, aware of a missile descending on his head, then something heavy crashed against his skull and he sank to the floor without a single groan.

MINUTES or hours later he opened his eyes cautiously, peered up into the overhead cluster of lights. His head throbbed and ached. Something salty and warm was on his lips. Carefully he turned his throbbing skull, winced at the pain and grew wide eyed at what he saw. Stretched out on the divan was the dead body of Cecil, Lord Chidester. On the table, tied side by side were Mrs. Hempfer and her lover, Dr. Mason.

August Hempfer, a sullen glow in his cheeks, a dull fire in his eyes stood near the head of the table gazing down at his faithless wife. Beside him stood the grinning Tomano, a bloodstained knife in his hand. Dr. Mason's face was reddened by gore where the knife had bitten too deep. He was unconscious.

"Your lover isn't much of a man," sneered the pudgy millionaire. "Perhaps after seeing what happened to him, you'll be willing to talk. Now tell me, where is my daughter? What have you done to her?"

The woman moaned. "With God as my witness, I don't know, August. We didn't do anything to her. I thought she was here."

Hempfer grunted. "You know she isn't. Tomano, see if you can freshen her memory."

The knife came down slowly, slowly,

(Continued on page 112)

SILVERSCREEN

It's impossible; but it's so! Dan Turner takes up the case of the haunted movie, in which an accidentally electrocuted wife comes back to plague her director-husband



I jumped; knocked the girl flat, as the gun in the window went, "Chow-Chow!"

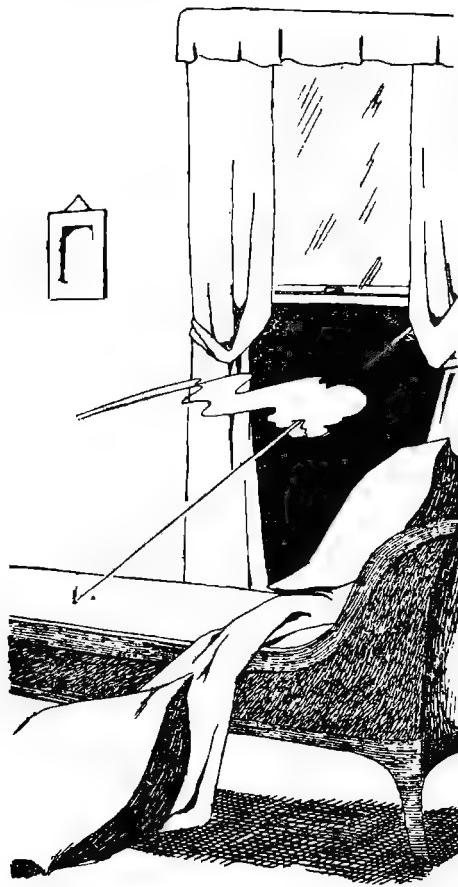
SOMETHING went "*spang!*" against my coupe's bullet-proof windshield. A spider-web of cracks circled the shatterproof glass. It made a beautiful design, but I wasn't in the mood to appreciate it.

I said: "What the hell!" and janimed

on my brakes. I slammed myself out of my jalopy and went leaping into the night to look for the bird who had fired that shot. But there was no trace of anyone on the sidewalks or the street. That section of Beverly Hills seemed as deserted as King Tut's tomb. The hour

S P E C T R E

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



was close to eleven.

I saw that I had parked almost directly in front of Adolph Maenzer's home. Maenzer was a former big-shot director for Altamount Pictures who was somewhat down on his luck. Just thirty minutes before, he had phoned me at my apartment and begged me to come see him right away. His voice had sounded so pleading over the wire that I had

agreed to call on him at once. And now, here I was in front of his Spanish stucco house—and some sharp tomato had pushed a lead slug against my jalopy's windshield.

From the direction the bullet had taken, I had a sneaking hunch it had been fired from somewhere close to Maenzer's joint. I walked up to his front door and rang the bell.

NOTHING happened for maybe three minutes. Then all of a sudden the door opened, and a little old lady peered out. She was short and dumpy, with a wrinkled face and a kindly, gentle expression. But right now I could see she had a grade-A case of the drizzling jitters. Her face was the color of watered milk, and she had a 1915 German-army Luger automatic in her wavering fist. She was aiming the Luger at my belt-buckle as she opened the door.

I don't like people to point their hardware at me. It makes me peeish. Besides, I'd been asked to come here. It got me sore to have a bullet thud into my windshield and then walk into the nasty end of a miniature cannon. That's no way to greet a man.

The little old lady glared at me and started jabbering something in German which I didn't understand. I saw her finger getting tight on the Luger's trigger, and I knew I had to do something about it before she bored a tunnel in my belly. So I took a long chance and yelled: "Hey—look out! Behind you!" Then, when she started to turn around,

I made a dive for her gun-wrist and twisted the big automatic out of her grasp.

She shrank away from me, whimpering. Just then I heard footfalls in the house behind her, and a man came racing to the front door from one of the rear rooms. It was Adolf Maenzer himself, and he was saying: "What's this? What's this?"

I said: "Take it easy, Mr. Maenzer. I'm Dan Turner. And I wish to God you'd tell me what this is all about."

Maenzer took the little old lady in his arms and spoke soothingly to her in German. Then he turned to me. "I am very sorry, Mr. Turner. This is Mrs. Hasdorf, my housekeeper. She has been in my family for years—long before I ever came from Berlin to Hollywood. She thought you were an enemy, and she was trying to protect me."

The wrinkled little Hasdorf dame grabbed my hand and clung to it. She sobbed out something I didn't understand; but I gathered that she was apologizing. So I patted her shoulder and said: "That's okay, lady. Forget it." She turned and tottered back into the rear part of the house.

When she had gone, Maenzer said: "I am glad you came so quickly, Mr. Turner. I have a very important investigation for you to make. I will pay you well—but I warn you, there may be danger."

I said: "Yeah. Somebody's already tried to put a slug through me."

Maenzer's pan got sort of greenish. "*Gott!*" he whispered. His eyes started darting around in a furtive, hunted way. For some reason, he reminded me of a weasel—or a cornered rat.

Then he reached out and grabbed my arm. "Come upstairs, Mr. Turner. I

will show you what has been troubling me."

AS I followed him to the second floor, my mind went over Maenzer's history—as much as I knew of it. He had been in Hollywood about eight years. In that time, he had become a top-flight director for Altamount. Then, about five or six months ago, tragedy and bad luck had commenced spotting him behind the eight-ball.

First his wife, a lovely blonde actress named Vesta Delorme, had died under shocking circumstances—and that's not intended as a pun. While taking a bath, an electric heater had accidentally fallen into her tub. There'd been a short circuit, and Vesta was electrocuted.

After that, Maenzer had gone all to hell. He'd started hitting the bottle, and it was rumored he also had tried a crack at the needle, too. In any case, he'd lost his berth with Altamount; hadn't worked for maybe four months—until just recently.

Within the past thirty days, a quickie outfit on Poverty Row had hired Maenzer to make one picture. He was supposed to be working on it now; and it might be the means of his getting a new toe-hold on success.

That was Maenzer's story as I remembered it. We reached the second floor, and he guided me into a leather-lined den. I noticed a small, silvered movie-screen set up at one end of the room; and opposite the screen I saw a projecting apparatus.

Maenzer said: "Mr. Turner, it is always my habit to view the 'rushes' of my pictures here in the privacy of my home. When a day's scenes have been shot, I have the negatives developed and prints made so that I may see the results by myself."

I nodded. "So what?"

His little rat-like eyes darted around the room. "Mr. Turner," he whispered hoarsely, "*this latest picture of mine is haunted!*"

I said: "Haunted? What the devil are you getting at?"

"Wait. I will show you," he answered in his accented English. He switched off the room's lights and snapped a button on his projection machine. A square of brilliance danced on the silvered screen at the other end of the den. Then a movie scene splashed into view.

It was an em-cee-you—a medium close-up—of Carlotta Cordova, the Spanish star who was playing the lead in Maenzer's new picture. She was a lush brunette wren, with plenty on the ball in the way of tantalizing curves. She was going through her emotional paces in a solo scene as I watched the picture unwinding before me. And then, suddenly, I drew a sharp breath and said: "What the hell!"

SOMETHING was happening to that picture on the screen before me. Carlotta Cordova was fading out, as if in a dissolve shot; then, replacing her, I saw the feature of someone else. Another girl. A blonde girl—

Vesta Delorme, Adolf Maenzer's wife who had been accidentally killed several months ago by electrocution in her tub!

Her image grew clearer, sharper, on the screen. She seemed to be looking straight out with accusing, haunting eyes. Then, as suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished; and Carlotta was back in the picture again.

Maenzer snapped off the projector, clicked on the room's lights. He was sweating, and his eyes were glassy. "Now you know what I mean when I say this picture is haunted!" he rasped.

"Each night for a week, now, the same thing has happened! I bring the day's 'rushes' home to my private projector—and always my dead wife's face appears on the film! It is driving me mad, Turner! I'm going insane!"

"Wait a minute," I told him. "This looks like a gag to me. There are several ways it could happen. Your cameraman might be making a double exposure—filming someone who looks like your dead wife before photographing the scenes you direct. Or it might be somebody in the developing room who's superimposing an old shot of your wife on this new footage. It might even be a film editor or cutter."

"Ja. I have thought of all those things, Turner. And I have checked them. But the theory falls down. I have found out that nobody—"

That was as far as he got. From the door behind me, a shot cracked out. I felt a slug pluck at my sleeve and then plock into the wall beyond me, chewing out pieces of plaster. I whirled around. In my fist I still had the Luger automatic I'd taken away from Maenzer's housekeeper. I raised it and took a flying dive for the doorway.

The second-floor hallway was dark, but I thought I caught a flash of something white at the far end, in the shadows. I yelled: "Stand still or I'll let you have a load of lead!"

The blurred white shape kept on going; vanished through an open doorway at the end of the hall. I squeezed the Luger's trigger but nothing happened. The damned gun was empty. Even as I hurled myself forward, I sniffed its muzzle. There was no trace of burned smoke.

That told me one thing. It proved that Mrs. Hasdorf hadn't been the one who'd fired a shot at my coupe's wind-

shield a while before, I dropped the Luger and dragged out my own .32 automatic from its shoulder-holster. I reached the doorway through which the blurred white shape had disappeared. I slammed myself into a bedroom.

There was an open casement window opposite me, and I heard a scratching, scrambling sound just outside. I also heard what seemed to be a muffled feminine moan of fright. I leaped to the window, peered outward and down.

The side of Maenzer's house supported a wooden lattice-work trellis covered with rambler rose-vines. There was a girl clinging to the trellis, just below my reach. She was dressed in white, and I knew she must be the blurred shape I'd been chasing.

BUT now she was in a hell of a mess. Somehow, the bottom of her dress had got tangled in the thorny rose-vines; and her whole frock was up over her head, trapping her. She couldn't wriggle her arms and shoulders free of the dress, and it was up over her face like a billowing tent, smothering her cries. From the shoulders south she was as naked as a picked goose except for skin-tight, glove-silk snuggies.

I couldn't see her face, of course, because it was covered by her updrawn frock. But I could see plenty of the rest of her. She wasn't hard on the eyes, either. Her squirming, kicking legs were plenty nifty; and the way her swelling hips filled out those snuggies made me feel years younger, made my mouth water. She was hanging by her hands; and her arms being over her head made her breasts pout out like taut marble cones. I noticed that she was losing her grip with her left hand; and when I looked closer, I saw why.

She had a gun in that left hand. A

small, nickel-plated revolver! And there was a thin wisp of smoke still issuing from the muzzle!

I tried to grab her but she was too far below the windowsill for me to reach her. I said: "Baby, you're caught. And you'd better hang on where you are until I run downstairs and get under you to break your fall. Don't let go until I tell you, or you'll drop twenty feet and bust your pretty form."

She just moaned through the folds of her skirt.

I turned, left the window, raced out of the room and down the stairs. I barged out through the front door; but as I hit the porch I smashed into a lean, wolf-jawed guy who had evidently just come from the driveway alongside the house. We ploughed together like a couple of billiard-balls on a carom shot, and I went skittering sidewise. I recovered my balance, stared at the egg I'd bumped into. I recognized him. He was Barry Barkis, president of the outfit for which Maenzer was making a picture.

He knew me, too. He said: "Turner—what on earth?"

I brushed past him. "No time to talk. See you later."

He grabbed my arm. "But listen—wait a minute—"

I shoved him away. I didn't like him anyhow. I dashed around to the side of the house and looked up toward the spot where I'd left the half-naked wren hanging on the trellis.

She was gone!

Her dress was still stuck to the thorns of the trellis; so I knew she must have managed to yank herself out of the frock and climb down to safety. Well, she couldn't get very far without her dress. I started looking around for her.

Then, all of a sudden I heard a sound that startled hell out of me.

It was a shot from inside the house.



"A shot—fired from outside—for God's sake do something, Turner—" Maenzer gibbered.

Before I could answer, I heard a motor being gunned to hell at the curb outside. I recognized the sound. It was my own jalopy! I said: "Damn it to hell!" and made a spurt across the front lawn, just as my coupe got under way.

Somewhere the hem of her dress had got caught in the rose vine, and she hung on the trellis, helpless.



I PIVOTED and sprinted for the front door. Just inside, I saw a sprawled form. It was Barkis, the quickie producer. He was flat on his face, and blood was seeping from a hole in the back of his noggin. His brains were splattered all over the place in a yellowish-red spew. Adolf Maenzer was standing over the corpse, looking sick.

I managed to catch my fingers in the luggage-rack behind the rumble-seat as my jalopy gathered speed; and I dragged myself up on the slippery, curved rear turtle-deck as the car went flying around the next intersection on two wheels and a prayer.

I peered in through the rear window; and I caught my breath. My jalopy was being driven by the dame who had clung to the trellis on the side of Maenzer's house. Now she was nude to the waist. I could see her gleaming shoulders, her coal-black hair. I caught a flash of her face in the rear-view mirror. I said: "For Cripes' sake! Carlotta Cordova!"

That's who it was, all right. The leading woman of Maenzer's latest picture!

I scrambled toward the left running-board as the Cordova cutie fed soup to the motor. She evidently didn't know I'd boarded the machine; because when I finally managed to reach the running-board alongside her, she turned and gave me one scared look. Then she said: "Oh, God!" and almost put us up on somebody's front porch.

I grabbed for the wheel, straightened it out. Then I jammed my automatic into Carlotta's neck and said: "Slow down and don't do anything rash, baby. Otherwise I'm likely to blow your head off."

She sobbed and cut down her speed to about twenty. "Wh-what are you g-going to d-do?" she whimpered.

I said: "I'm going to take you to my apartment and ask you some questions. And you'd better a damn' sight answer me straight, if you don't want to spend the rest of your life on the inside looking out!"

I KEPT her covered with my roscoe, forced her to drive to my apartment. When she parked in front of my joint,

I reached inside the coupe and found her nickel-plated revolver. I shoved it in my pocket and said: "Come on, kiddo. Get out of there."

"I can't! I—I haven't any d-dress on!"

I slipped out of my coat, handed it to her. "Put that around you, though it seems a shame. Then we'll go up the back way so nobody'll notice your bare legs." My temperature went back to normal, with all that seductive loveliness covered.

I prodded her up to my flat, opened the door and made her go inside. Still keeping her covered, I managed to set fire to a gasper and pour a couple of slugs of Vat 69. I gave her one, drank the other myself. Then I hauled her down on my davenport forcibly and said: "Now, then, Carlotta. Just exactly what was your idea in trying to shoot a hole in my windshield when I first went to Maenzer's house? And later, why did you try to plug me when I was with him in his den?"

"I—I refuse to talk!" she flashed at me defiantly.

I reached an arm around her, yanked my coat away from her shoulders. Then I looked her over. She was damned easy on the optics. Her bare legs were smoother than the soft pink silk of her panties, and her thighs were as white and creamy as a celibate's dream. Up above her slender waist, her lovely body swelled outward in two enticing little hillocks of flesh—and as an old connoisseur of feminine charms, I'd say that Carlotta Cordova was just about perfect.

She shrank away from me. "Don't touch me!"

I said: "The hell I won't touch you! I've got some questions I want answered,

and unless you unbutton your tongue I'm going to work you over."

"I—I won't answer any questions!"

"Then I'll make you, by God!" I said, putting the accent on the "make." And I hauled her against me, clamped my mouth over her lips, and started giving her the works.

She struggled and squirmed. "No—No—!"

I grinned into her flashing black eyes. I said: "Sister, I've got one certain way of making dames talk. It never misses. Now, either you spill the information I want or else . . ." There was no mistaking my meaning.

Very deliberately she laughed at me. "If that's your system, go ahead!" she taunted me. She drew up her arms over her head, so that I could see the smooth curves of her armpits and the contours of her breasts where they swelled outward.

I THOUGHT she was trying to run a bluff on me; and I don't fall for bluffs. So I kissed her again, hard. I was holding her by her bare shoulders, and my fingers strayed down her arms. She was beginning to pant a little.

I shoved her back among the cushions of the davenport and whispered: "Baby, either you're going to talk or you're going to be sorry. . . ."

"You can't scare me. You wouldn't dare. . . ."

"Wouldn't I?" I held her so tight that she couldn't get her breath. I could feel those firm little mounds burrowing into my chest as she squirmed in my arms. I couldn't tell whether she was wiggling to get away from me or trying to snuggle closer. By that time, I didn't give a damn.

I'll admit I'd started out just to scare some information out of her; but hold-

ing her so close and smelling the scent of her hair and feeling her warm flesh against me—well, after all, I'm human. I forgot my original purpose for a few minutes. What the hell?

THEN, when I thought she should have learned her lesson, I said: "Okay, babe. Now will you talk?"

She grinned at me. "No. I won't talk. And there's nothing else you can do to scare me, is there?"

"Yeah. I could beat hell out of you."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Maybe I wouldn't. But there's one thing I sure as God *will* do. I'll turn you over to the cops for killing Barkis at Maenzer's house a little while ago!"

Her face got pale, and for a second I thought she was going to faint in my arms. "B-Barkis—killed?" she moaned.

I said: "Yeah. Killed. Bumped off. Rubbed out. And a half-minute after he was croaked, you tried to lam away in my jalopy. Now, how do you think you're going to explain all that?"

She grabbed me, held my arms. She was trembling so hard that I could see the quivering of her pert, perky little breasts—like bowls of moulded jelly. "L-listen, Mr. Turner!" she whispered. "I—I guess it's time for me to tell everything. I'll *have* to tell everything! And then you've got to help me send Adolf Maezner to the noose for murder. For *two* murders!"

I said: "What the devil—?"

The words were gushing out of her now, like oil out of a million-barrel well. "This is what happened, Mr. Turner!" she panted. "A few months ago, Maenzer's wife, Vesta Delorme, d-died. Her death was accidental, everybody said. But I know better. Maenzer murdered her!"

"What?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it. In the first place, Vesta was my best friend. I l-loved her as much as if she'd been my sister. And I happen to know that she had a deathly fear of electric heaters in her bathroom. She would never allow one near her when she was bathing. Yet she was killed by an electric heater falling into her tub. That doesn't make sense, Mr. Turner. You know it doesn't!"

I said: "Okay. For the sake of argument, it doesn't make sense. So what?"

"So this: It's my firm belief that Maenzer deliberately knocked that electric heater into Vesta's bath! He murdered her—just as he murdered Barry Barkis tonight and then tried to blame it on me!"

"Why should Maenzer murder Barkis? That doesn't add up right," I said. "Barkis was giving Maenzer a chance to come back. Maenzer wouldn't bump the guy who was helping him get back on his feet. That's screwy!"

"No, it isn't screwy. Not when you know all the details. You see—Barry and Vesta had been . . . lovers. . . ."

"You mean Barkis was playing around with Maenzer's wife before she was killed?"

"Yes."

"And you think Maenzer found it out, croaked her, and then waited for a chance to kill Barkis too?"

"Y-yes. That's what I think."

I SHOOK my head. "Nix, sister. Maenzer's scared by that phantom picture of his wife that keeps bobbing up in his movie rushes. But he doesn't act like a killer. And he wouldn't have phoned to me to go to his house if he'd been expecting to bump Barkis almost in front of my eyes." I took her wrists. "Carlotta," I said, "you've been feeding me a lot of hooey to steer suspicion away

from yourself. You're the one that shot Barkis!"

"No—no!" she wailed. "Take a look at the revolver you took away from me. You'll find only two shots fired out of it. One was the shot I tried to put through your windshield. The second is the bullet I fired at you when you were in Maenzer's den, just after he'd finished running that reel of film through his projector."

I said: "Oh! So you admit firing those two shots, do you?"

"Y-yes. I w-wanted to scare you away. I didn't want you to take Maenzer's case."

"Why not?"

"Because that phantom picture of Vesta on Maenzer's rushes . . . it's part of a plan that Barry and I cooked up. We were trying to frighten Maenzer into confessing that he killed Vesta. Maenzer's a spiritualistic believer. We thought we'd be able to make him think Vesta was coming back to haunt him. N-now do you understand?"

Something clicked inside my brain. I said: "Yeah. I'm beginning to understand plenty. And I want you to go home to your apartment right now. Don't leave until I phone you. I'll lend you a topcoat to cover yourself. Take a taxi—and get going right now."

She gave me a funny look. "Wh-what do you plan to do?"

"Trap a killer!" I said. "Now get the hell out."

THE minute she'd gone, I grabbed my phone and dialed police headquarters. I caught my friend, Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad, before he left for the night. "Get up here to my joint right away!" I told him. "I'm going to have a job for you!"

It took him less than fifteen minutes



*"I—I refuse to talk,"
she flashed at me de-
fiantly.*

to meet me outside the entrance of my apartment building. I piled into his official sedan and said: "Drive out to Maenzer's house in Beverly—and don't spare the mules!"

"Adolf Maenzer?" Donaldson roared at me. "Say, what the hell are you—a fortune teller or something? We just got a call from Maenzer's place about

forty minutes ago. He said a guy named Barkis had been shot at his front door. I've got men out there now, cleaning up and asking questions. How in God's name did you know about it?"

I said: "I was there when Barkis was shot. Now fold up your face and pay attention to your driving."

It didn't take Dave long to get us to



Beverly Hills. He braked to a stop in front of Maenzer's house, and we threaded our way past a lot of other official-looking cars until we gained the front door. I rang the bell.

The door opened. I saw Mrs. Hasdorf, the wrinkled little old housekeeper. I said: "We want to see Mr. Maenzer, please."

"Ja," she nodded at me. She led us into the downstairs study, where Maenzer was facing a battery of newspaper reporters.

Maenzer spotted me and drew a sighing sob. "Turner—*Gott sei dank!*" he whispered. "I need your help more than ever. . . !"

I said: "Yeah. But before anything else, I want to go upstairs and take another look at the window that girl climbed out of." To Donaldson I said: "Wait here for me, Dave."

I legged it up to the second floor. But I didn't go near the open window where Carlotta Cordova had climbed down the trellis. Instead, I snapped on my flashlight and found a closet. I looked inside; saw what I'd hoped to find—a tin trunk with wooden slats. I pried it open, started rummaging around. Just as I finished with the photograph album I'd suspected of being here—

Blooie! Something bounced down on the back of my skull with the force of a trip-hammer. I pitched forward, buried my schnozzle in the trunk. I wasn't out for more than three or four seconds; but when I got back on my feet, the photograph album was gone and there was nobody in the room with me.

I STAGGERED back into the upper hallway—and saw Maenzer standing at the head of the stairs with an odd look on his pan. "I was beginning to worry about you, Turner," he said.

I said: "I'm okay. Come on downstairs." We went down together, and I buttonholed Donaldson. I said: "Dave, I think I've got your case solved for you. The person who bumped Barkis tonight is the same person who murdered Vesta Delorme a few months ago!"

Donaldson said: "But Vesta's death was an accident!"

"No. It was murder. The killer tossed a connected electric heater into Vesta's tub while she was bathing."

Maenzer was white. "But—but who—"

I looked him square in the eye and said: "I don't know for sure. But in thirty minutes I'll tell you the murderer's name—just as soon as I've had a chance to ask Carlotta Cordova one question!" Then I turned to Donaldson. "Come on, Dave. I want you to take me downtown to pick up a certain bit of evidence; then we'll get the Cordova cutie!"

Dave and I leaped out of the house; scrambled into his official car. We headed in Wilshire, hell-for-leather. Two blocks beyond LaBrea I said: "Okay, Dave—slow down. Here's the Gaylaird Hotel where Carlotta lives."

"But you said you wanted to go downtown first to pick up a certain bit of evidence."

"That was a stall. Come along." I led him into the Gaylaird, and we went up to the penthouse on the roof of the left turret, where Carlotta had her sumptuous quarters. I rang the bell, and a Chink maid opened the door. I shoved my automatic into the slant-eyed baby's face and said: "Don't make a sound or you'll be shaking hands with Confucius!"

The maid went pale under her yellow skin. I backed her into a corner and said: "Where's Miss Cordova?"

"In—bed, sir."

I turned to Donaldson. "Guard Miss Asia, here, while I go boudoir-delving." Then I made a bee-line for the rear of the apartment. I saw a door and opened it. I smelled expensive perfume; and in the room's dim light I saw Carlotta lying in bed, sleeping. One shoulder-strap of her pajama was down half way to her elbow, baring most of a delicious little breast. But I didn't have any time for such things. I saw a French window being slowly opened on the other side of the room; an automatic's muzzle poked in and aimed at the Cordova cutie's heart—

I JUMPED; landed square on top of Carlotta, knocked her out of bed. I went rolling over the floor after her just as that gun in the window went "*Chow-chow!*" Then I was on my feet. I smashed myself at the window, landed outside on the turret-roof terrace. I saw a running figure. I smashed into it.

"*Gott verdammt!*" my captive yelled in an insane whimper. Donaldson came charging toward me, flashing his heavy-duty electric torch. He sprayed light on my prisoner's face. He said: "God in heaven—it's Mrs. Hasdorff! Maenzer's housekeeper!"

I said: "Not just his housekeeper. *His mother, too!*"

The little, wrinkled old woman squirmed under me. "*Ja! His mutter!* He was ashamed of me because I was German—because I could not goot Engish speak. But how did you guess?"

I said: "I found it out when I looked through your trunk in that upstairs room of Maenzer's house. From the way you'd acted, I had an idea you were more than just a housekeeper. You were too interested in Maenzer; no servant would take such good care of him. I

went through your trunk, found an old photograph album. I saw pictures of you as a young woman, holding a baby in your arms. And other pictures of that baby as it grew to boyhood, manhood.

"The child was Adolph Maenzer. And there was one photograph of you yourself—autographed 'To my son, Adolf.' That was the tip-off. But just as I found the picture, you sneaked in behind me and biffed me on the head."

"You—you suspected me?" the old lady gasped.

I said: "Sure. I had most of the details figured out; but I had to trap you to prove my case. I realized that your son had been pretty much of a rat. He abused his wife, Vesta Delorme. And he forced you, his mother, to the status of a servant. You allowed that; but Vesta kicked over the traces. She took a lover—Barry Barkis—to get even.

"Then you discovered that Vesta was playing around. Being still loyal to your son, you killed his unfaithful wife by dropping a hooked-up electric heater into her tub while she was taking a bath. That's the truth, isn't it, Mrs. Hasdorff?"

The old lady said: "*Ja. Und* I would do it again—!"

I set fire to a gasper and said: "Well, you got away with it for a while. The coroner called Vesta's death accidental, and you thought you were safe. But meanwhile, things began to happen. Carlotta, who had been Vesta's friend, got the idea that your son had murdered Vesta. So Carlotta cooked up the double-exposure scheme on your son's movie 'rushes'—made it appear as if Vesta's ghost was haunting the film. She did it with an old Vesta Delorme reel. And your son, being innocent, called me in to break the 'haunt.'

(Continued on page 109)

MURDER



Though his robed body still sat erect, his head was suspended by a cord, a foot above it!

Rapinee's last trick was no illusion and Johnny Harding, ace columnist, is forced to turn from the girl who is using all her wiles on him to solve a murder

By CARY
MORAN



M A G I C

JOHNNY HARDING, ace columnist of the *Daily Telegraph*, glared at the girl beside him, pulled his leg away. She had pressed it warmly with her own round knee. Her fingers were caressing his arm. In the dim light of the luxurious room her face was close to his as she chattered in his ear.

Johnny said, "Quit playing and try to

keep still! Did I ever show you the picture of the dame that talked herself to death?"

Across the room Thalia Fitzhugh sat on a deep divan beside Carl Amherst, her husband's business partner. The girl beside Harding was Thalia's stepdaughter. The house itself, knee deep in luxury, speaking of wealth and opulence in



every nook and cranny, belonged to Marshall Fitzhugh who stood against the mantel glass in hand.

Outside rain beat against the windows. The wind droned steadily. The steady beat of waves slapped the rocky shore. Paradise Arms was situated on Paradise Island, nearly a mile out in the bay.

At one end of the room were velvet curtains, partitioning off some twenty feet of the enormous *salon*. Every guest in the room was eyeing these curtains with a certain amount of expectancy in his or her eye.

The girl beside Johnny said, "But I'm not kidding! This friend of mine is going to back me in a revue. If you'll give me a little break and plug me in your column for a buildup—you know, society girl goes gaga about stage, and—"

Again her knee against his. She leaned so close that one firm breast throbbed against his skinny shoulder. His uneasy eyes saw the deep cleft between her arrogant breasts as the negligible dinner gown gaped. Again he pulled away impatiently.

"Nuts. You better marry this angel instead of taking a flyer at the stage."

"Why?" she persisted. "I can sing. I can dance a little, and I've got the build for it."

She thrust a leg out before her, pulled at the hem of her skirt. Fascinated, Johnny watched. Sheer chiffon, well filled, rounded, sleek. The dim light eventually revealed a five inch strip of dusky white flesh topping the chiffon.

"Plenty there," she said softly, "and plenty here!"

She preened herself, breasts jutting forth impudently, taut curves plainly seen through the thin material of her dress.

Johnny saw Thalia Fitzhugh's sar-

donic gaze across the room and groaned. "Put your dress down, simple mind! Legs and breasts are a dime a dozen on Theatre Row! If—"

HE paused. During the last half of her conversation weird music had filled the room. Now a faint spotlight illuminated the velvet curtains at the end of the room. The assembled guests tensed. Now the curtains parted a little and a grotesque statue slid by unseen hands took the center of the improvised stage. A voice intoned from behind the curtain.

"Siva! Siva! Siva! To whom we pray. Grant us the power, the ability to see into the future, to gaze into the past, to suspend all time."

The music droned on. The voice ceased. The statue grinned balefully in the amber light.

A slender figure slid from between the curtains, postured for a moment against the dark background, then made a genuflection before the gilded image. The audience gasped. The music swirled tonelessly but rhythmatically.

The dancer turned. Bare feet made no sound on the smooth floor. Her eyes seemed glazed, peered straight ahead lifelessly, but it was her body that held the watchers spellbound. The amber spotlight gave it a yellowish, a deep cream tinge. A thin, sheath-like loin cloth was of the same color. Tiny cups that shielded generous breasts matched perfectly. It was as if she stood nude before the watchers, the only spot of color being the red, passionate slash of heavily rouged lips.

A cream cloth obscured her hair and, directly in the center of her forehead, was a gleaming sapphire or rhinestone. At the apex of each breast cup was an-

other, and a fourth and larger was embedded in the center of her tumultuous waist.

For a moment she swayed in rhythm to the music, then the melody seemed to sweep across her body. Muscles quivered, soft flesh vibrated, the gleaming stones danced and twinkled in scintillating orbits and parabolas.

Johnny said, "Now if you had what that baby has—"

"I've got everything she has," said the girl beside him, "only more so." Her hand was laid caressingly on Johnny's. Johnny snorted, pulled away, noted that the skirt of her dress was still drawn above her stocking top.

FOR perhaps three minutes the dancer at the end of the room postured, pranced, wove, and vibrated before the leering statue. As the music sank to a sobbing finale, she knelt before Siva, touched the floor with her forehead once, twice, thrice. Then, respectfully she pushed the ugly thing far to one side of the curtains, returned to grasp a hanging golden cord. Her voice was dead, emotionless, her glazed eyes peering straight ahead. She was like a carven statue, the only thing that denoted life being the rapid rise and fall of her half exposed breasts, gleaming creamy in the amber light.

"Make way, make way, he comes, he comes! Rapinee, the man who knows, the favored of Siva, the master of illusion."

Slowly she drew on the cord. The curtains parted noiselessly. She moved with them, stepping silently in her bare feet so that the scene of the improvised stage was revealed in its entirety. Some one of the guests gasped.

In the very center of the stage was a small table. Atop the table a gleaming

crystal. Behind the table a huge throne-like chair. A man sat in the chair, a white robe covering his wide shoulders. Johnny's eyes widened.

The girl beside him whispered, "God!" softly.

Rapinee, master of illusion! Several of the guests applauded half heartedly. Suddenly Thalia Fitzhugh screamed fearfully, lurched toward the improvised stage, staggered and fainted. During the meleé that followed, the girl who had pulled the cord stood stiffly, woodenly in one spot, staring straight ahead over the heads of the milling guests. Johnny Harding was the first man to reach the side of the master of illusion.

Rapinee's last trick had been no illusion! His robed body sat stiffly erect in the massive chair; but his turbaned head was a full foot above the body, twisting from side to side gruesomely, white teeth flashing in the swarthiness of his face, lips pulled back in a leering snarl, eyes distended, gleaning white, glazed and stricken.

It was only after arriving at his side that Harding saw the severed head was tied by a black cord from a beam overhead. Blood dripped steadily from the head to fall on the once white robe. It welled in a spouting stream from the cut arteries in the decapitated body, trickled like great red serpents down across the once white chest and splashed softly on the hardwood floor.

Carl Amherst was the second person beside the body. His own eyes were wide with horror, his nostrils white and quivering at sight of the blood. Fitzhugh and several of the other guests bent over Thalia. The half nude woman, Rapinee's assistant, still stood woodenly at one side with the cord in her hand, staring straight ahead.

Beside the decapitated man on the floor lay a curved scimitar. Without touching it Johnny examined the death weapon. In spite of the gruesome blood, he saw that it had been lately sharpened, that the steel was bright and shiny far back from the razor sharp edge. With a single stride he reached the scimitar's mate where it hung on the wall. Its edge was blunt, dulled with age. The curtain flapped at the window which was up for a space of two inches.

Had the killer done this gruesome work and departed by that window?

As he turned, he saw the white faced Carl Amherst withdraw a hand from the corpse's robe. The hand slid immediately into the side pocket of Amherst's tuxedo. Johnny said, "Don't touch that body, Amherst! Has anyone called the police?"

AS if in answer to his question, Marshall Fitzhugh burst into the room again, his face white. "The telephone is out!" he said. "Either the storm has washed out the line or the killer has cut it!"

Harding said, "Get everyone in the place into this room, Marshall, and get them here at once. We'll have to send someone to the mainland."

He turned, made his way through the swirling group of horror stricken guests, approached the half nude girl who still stared stonily ahead at one side of the improvised stage.

"Snap out of it! Come on now!"

He slapped her face sharply. She did not move. He put a hand behind her neck, pressed her jaw sharply with the palm of his other hand.

"This is a hell of a time to play," giggled Rita Fitzhugh beside him.

"Shut up! She's hypnotized. Rapinee hypnotized her at the start of his per-

formance. I've seen the act before. Stay with her a minute."

He turned as if to work his way through the crowd. Carl Amherst stood almost behind him. Johnny stumbled, fell against the man, caught him in both arms and finally fought his way erect.

Amherst said, "Clumsy ass," and Johnny hurried from the room with muttered apologies. Once outside the door he looked at the object he had lifted from Amherst's pocket. It was a packet of letters, tied with red cord. The top one was addressed to "Rapinee, 147 East Plymouth, City." He thrust them behind the cushion of a heavy chair and hurried back to the room.

Marshall Fitzhugh had herded the wide-eyed servants into the room with the guests. Johnny surveyed them coldly. A butler, a cook, a scullion, a cook's helper, two maids, a negro man of all work. All servile, cringing, dismayed. "Someone will have to go for the police," snapped Johnny and, glaring about, "but damned if I want any of you to leave."

Amherst spoke stiffly. "Don't cast any of your aspersions at us, Harding. Remember we were all in this room, on this side of the curtain. Maybe the girl there, his helper, can throw a little light on the subject. Personally I think she's stalling."

Marshall Fitzhugh broke in, spoke to the ashen negro. "Go down to the boathouse and get Bulotti up. It's a bad night, but he'll have to go to the mainland for the police."

The negro hesitated, departed on unwilling feet.

Johnny said, "Who's Bulotti?"

"He takes care of the boat and the grounds. Lives on the other side of the island in a cottage. He'll be here presently."

He lifted the candlestick high and sat up suddenly.



he said. "Take me to the nearest bathroom."

AS they left the room, he saw Thalia Fitzhugh still sitting on the divan. She was staring straight ahead. Tears had ruined her makeup. Streaks of mascara ran across the rouge of her cheeks. Her eyes were wide with horror, bleak with hopelessness, her mouth twisted in a grimace of fear.

Johnny followed the girl, Rita, up the

Johnny walked to the rigid woman who was Rapinee's assistant. He picked up in his arms. To Rita Fitzhugh

steps, his eyes on the muscles of her liquid, swinging hips, sliding beneath the snug dress. "Thalia," he said aloud, "is taking it pretty hard."

The girl opened the door of a bathroom, said, "Why not? Rapinee was her boy friend. Everybody knew it but poor dad, and he was beginning to suspect! Do you want help?"

"Turn on the cold water."

The tub was half full of water when he put the nearly nude woman in it. Her flesh quivered warmly, but the set expression of her eyes did not change. Johnny set her down, began to splash water in her face, saying, "You're all right now, you're all right now," over and over. Presently he tired, jerked her to her feet. "Try the shower, Rita. Maybe hot water will do it."

The loin cloth, the breast cups, evidently had been affixed with a glue like preparation. As he stood her erect, one breast cup loosened, almost tumbled into the water. The clinging loin cloth released its grip. Johnny grabbed for a towel, wrapped it about flaring hips. The hot water sprayed onto the smooth slopes of her breasts. The gleaming stone at her waist broke loose, splashed into the water. Rita picked it up, tossed it contemptuously aside.

"Paste," she snorted. "I thought they were real! The sapphire Rapinee used in his turban was real. I know—" She stopped, looked at Johnny with wide eyes. They were thinking of the same thing.

"Gone!" snapped Johnny. "Rapinee's sapphire is gone!"

The hypnotized girl stirred.

"You're all right, you're all right," intoned Johnny and massaged soft flesh. Her breasts were nubile, firm yet resili-ent. Rita leaned to help him. Gradually

the brown eyes awakened, took on a glimmer of intelligence. She moved her head, tried to shake water from her eyes, seemed to realize a man was watching her nakedness and covered her breasts with the palms of her hands.

"Where—?" she began.

"What's your name?" snapped Johnny.

"Sheila, but my clothes! Where—?"

Rita departed, giggling, for a negligee. Gently Johnny tried to explain as best he could.

"So you've got to try and help me," he concluded. "Try and remember all that happened while you were behind the curtain."

"Dead! Dead!" she repeated over and over. "Rapinee is dead." Miserably she turned to Johnny. "I can't help you. He hypnotized me before every performance. That's the last I remember."

RITA reappeared. They threw the negligee about the girl's quivering shoulders, went back down the steps to the assembled guests. Sheila dropped on a davenport beside Thalia.

Fitzhugh was talking to an Italian near the door. The Italian was shaking his head.

"I know it's rough, I know it's storming," snapped Fitzhugh. "But we've got to have the police. There's been murder, man! So get going."

Johnny looked at Bulotti curiously. The Italian was staring past him at the divan. Johnny turned. Sheila sat there dumb in her grief, the negligee gaping open. The curves of her provocative breasts rose and fell. One creamy thigh was revealed almost hip high. Johnny glanced back at the Italian. His black eyes were distended, utterly afire. A red tongue flicked out to lick at spittel that

drooled from the corner of his mouth. Fitzhugh pushed him.

"Aw right, aw right, boss, I go." Unwillingly he left the room. Johnny went over and sat down beside the dead man's assistant. Fitzhugh spoke slowly.

"The police will be here in an hour. I think it would be best if we all stayed close together." He nodded at the servants. "You will please prepare coffee for the group and also bring liquor. Until the police arrive there may be danger. After all we don't know—"

The assembled guests looked at one another suspiciously. Thalia glared at her husband. Fitzhugh glared back. Johnny began to wonder. He remembered that scimitar that had beheaded the man. Someone had sharpened it. It was premeditated murder. There was something fantastic about the suspended head. He wondered just where Carl Amherst fitted. Why had he removed a packet of letters from the dead man's clothing? How had he known that packet of letters was there? He caught Amherst's eyes fixed on him glaringly, accusingly. Johnny grinned faintly and the man looked away.

Johnny had known Amherst for years, not as a friend, but as a bright lights playboy. He knew that lately Amherst had been drinking more than usual, had been cutting an even gayer swath along the primrose path. Now where did it all fit? He remembered what Rita had said concerning an affair between Rapienee and Thalia Fitzhugh. Plenty of motive for murder there, but both Thalia and her husband had been on the right side of the curtain! Their alibis were perfect. But what of the missing sapphire?

He took the Scotch and soda offered him by the servant, sipped it thought-

fully. Amherst moved closer to the divan where Harding sat. To the girl Sheila, beside him, Johnny said, "Listen, I've got to talk to you privately." He kept his voice low but *not too low*. "There's a summerhouse at the end of that gravel walk that leads from the conservatory. I'll leave in a minute, then you leave. I'll meet you there."

Presently he arose, lit a cigarette and sauntered out. For several moments he smoked thoughtfully in the darkened hallway, listened to the subdued conversation from the *salon*. Presently he saw the shadow of the girl on the far wall as she moved slowly toward the conservatory. He waited, ground the cigarette out in the ash tray, and tiptoed toward the French doors that led toward the summerhouse. He stepped out into the storm.

Lightning flashed. He saw a dark figure with upraised hand behind the adjacent shrubbery. He tried to dodge but the descending arm was too quick. A sharp blow cracked against the side of his head. He crumpled, fell with his face in the gravel.

NEVER was he totally unconscious. He felt hands pawing through his pockets, hurling his belongings aside, a thick voice cursing with every movement. He tried to fight back the cobwebs, but his head was ringing, roaring too greatly. The dark figure cursed again, straightened and kicked him viciously in the ribs. Then it trotted away down the path toward the bay.

Rain in his face finally revived Harding. He struggled erect, gulped in the cool air and staggered down the pathway in the direction his assailant had taken. He passed the summerhouse, peered in. Empty. Evidently the girl had not as yet come down. He trotted

on unsteadily. In the distance he saw the dark bulk of the boathouse. Lightning revealed the pier reaching out into the breakers.

Almost there he stumbled over something, sprawled at full length on the gravel again. Cursing, he scrambled up. Again lightning. *He had stumbled over a body.* He peered down at the face of the inert man. It was swarthy in the flickering light cast by his cigarette lighter. Bulotti, the caretaker! Blood ran down the side of his face from a two inch scalp wound. Johnny turned him over, let the rain revive him. The man groaned. His little eyes opened. He saw Johnny, spoke faintly.

"The boat—she is gone! Somebody steal the boat! I come back to tell Mister Fitzhugh and someone, somebody hit me on head!"

Johnny got him on his feet. So the boat was gone! The telephone out! No chance to get aid and a killer, a murderer loose on the island!

"Go back to the house and tell Fitzhugh to come down here," he said grimly. "Give me that flashlight you've got there."

The man handed him the light, started for the house with staggering steps. Johnny headed for the boathouse. The waves beat against the sturdy pier but no launch was to be seen. He cast the rays of the light about in all directions, even over the water. The light penetrated for a few feet and he saw something white beneath the surface. He ran into the boathouse, returned with an oar and jabbed at the shimmering white thing. When he arose, his lips were grim. The launch hadn't disappeared; it had been scuttled! It lay in six feet of water at the end of the pier.

The light flashed again over the wet

boards. At the very edge of the pier he saw gleaming metal.

It was an axe. It had not been there long, for Johnny saw with a thrill of horror that the blade and handle was bloodstained. Someone had been killed or assaulted with that axe!

Where was Fitzhugh? Damn it, this thing was getting thicker and thicker. He went back toward the house at a half run. As far as the attack on he himself was concerned he almost had it figured out. Probably Amherst in search of the letters! If Amherst's clothes were damp, he'd beat the truth out of him. But the sinking of the boat, the blood on the axe!

AS he passed the summerhouse, he paused, flashed the light inside and caught his breath. Spread eagled on a stone bench was the body of Sheila, Rapinee's assistant. Horrified Johnny kept the light on her. The scanty negligee had been torn from her body. Her breasts were criss-crossed with scars, the wake of clawing nails. Even her milky thighs were splotched and bruised. Surely the marks of a fiend! And the head! Ah, God, the head, literally split from pate to chin, by a gruesome weapon.

The axe! The bloody axe!

"Harding! Where are you, Harding?" A voice from the house.

Amherst and Fitzhugh were standing just outside the open doorway. "What is it?" panted Harding.

Amherst's clothes were wet, but he was standing in the rain! Johnny's heart sank.

"Bulotti," said Fitzhugh in a thin voice. "We found him unconscious outside the door. There's a killer loose on this island!"

Johnny grunted. "And he just killed Sheila, Rapinee's girl in the summer-house. I found the body!"

Amherst said, "My God!" His eyes glowed strangely. "What's the matter

Carrying Rapinee's assistant, Johnny followed Rita.



"with you? There's blood all over your face?"

Johnny felt their hostile gazes on him, wheeled and trotted into the house without answering.

TEN minutes later the group stood again in the *salon*, nervous and disraught. Most of the men were armed

from Fitzhugh's gunroom. All listening to Harding.

"All we can do is wait until daylight and signal for help," he said shortly. "In the meantime you can comb the island for the killer if you like. Personally, I'm going to bed and get some rest."

Fitzhugh snorted. "I don't get you, Harding. You claim to have been

assaulted. Bulotti was knocked out and Rapinee and the woman were killed. How can you rest when all of our lives are in danger?"

"Maybe," Johnny's voice was soft, "I don't think the killer is *hiding* on the island! *Maybe I know who it is and I'm just waiting for the police.*"

Silence. At least a dozen pair of eyes glared at Johnny. He lit a cigarette, sat down between Rita and her stepmother; Thalia, and watched sardonically while the men filed from the room.

Talk lagged. Thalia said, "For God's sake, let's get out of this room. It gives me the creeps."

Presently, in the library, Johnny yawned, asked for a bed. Thalia directed him to the upper floor in a weary voice.

Harding went to the designated room, turned on the light. From his pocket he withdrew the packet of letters he had hid in the upholstering of the hall chair. As he read them, his face was a study. They were passionate, inflamed; a woman's soul laid bare. Addressed to Rapinee, they were written by Thalia Fitzhugh.

He tiptoed to the head of the stair; listened to the babble of voices below. He entered room after room, lit a match in each and departed the way he came. The last room on the east was the one he sought: Thalia's bedroom.

He moved pictures, looked behind bookcases, but nowhere was a safe concealed. He searched the bureau, the vanity, all the furniture. At the bedside he rose with a grunt of satisfaction. In his hand was an immense stack of stiff green bills. He thrust them in his pocket, tiptoed from the room.

A French door let him onto the portico. He clambered down the trellis

and headed for the boathouse and the cottage where Bulotti lived. He spent at least half an hour prying carefully into nooks and crannies, another half hour in the man's workshop.

He returned to the house the way he had come, barely missing the returning search party. At the head of the steps he listened, heard Fitzhugh's booming voice. "We've searched every nook and cranny of the island with no results. It's my notion that the killer had a boat and escaped after killing the woman. But we'll stand guard tonight and we're certain to get relief by morning!"

MIDNIGHT. Johnny lay on the bed and waited. Johnny was nervous, for Johnny was murder bait. He knew in his heart that one of the assembled guests had committed the murders. By hinting that he had found a clue, he placed his own name at the top of the prospective list of victims.

A clock struck one. He heard the click of the door, heard it open softly. He reached his left hand to the cord of the bedlamp; his right grasped a heavy candlestick. Padding footsteps—the approach of the killer. His nerves were tense, torturous. He could stand it no longer. He pulled the chain of the bedlamp and leaped to his feet.

The wide eyes of Rita Fitzhugh stared down at him. She said, "Ssssh!" and came toward him on bare feet. She wore a gauzy nightdress, more revealing than concealing. Her pointed breasts surged against the thin material, the deep cleft between them was scarcely obscured. The odor of Scotch whisky was heavy on her breath.

Johnny grinned, dropped the candlestick, and sat down on the bed weakly. She sat down beside him, put an arm

about his shoulder, pressed a breast against his arm. The heat of her round thigh burned into him. She said, "I wasn't kidding about going in a musical, Johnny. You going to help me out?"

He reached over and flipped off the bedlamp. He said, "Sure!" She sighed and nestled close to him with a little shiver.

Once, nearly an hour later he thought he heard the click of the door catch again. He leaned over her, kissed her hard on the soft flesh of a shoulder. She groaned ecstatically. Johnny listened again—heard the door click closed.

HE was up early walking about the exterior of the house. The telephone wire had been cut near the house itself and, with Bulotti's help, he soon had it spliced. Bulotti looked like the aftermath of a hard night. To all of Johnny's questions he answered nothing at all, merely grunted, rolling his eyes and doing his work with trembling hands.

Before the others were fully awakened, Johnny was using the phone. His first call was to Pete Jackson, financial editor of the *Telegraph*. His second to Bill Nobles, head of the homicide squad.

Presently Jackson called him back, talked at some length. Johnny hung up the phone, went into the library where the others had gathered, and announced that the line had been repaired, that the police were on their way.

Instead of a noticeable air of relief appearing, tension seemed to set in. Amherst looked worried. Fitzhugh glared at Thalia; she glared back. Rita pressed close to Johnny, an adoring smile on her face and, across the room, Amherst glared viciously at the pair of them.

At nine-fifteen a police launch ar-

rived bearing Bill Nobles and various other members of the homicide squad, including photographers, fingerprint men, and a doctor. The bodies were examined and photographed, carried out in wicker baskets. The doctor reported that Sheila, the girl in the summerhouse, had been assaulted as well as murdered.

Johnny Harding took Bill Nobles aside, spoke shortly. Nobles looked puzzled, but sent a man to bring in everyone on the place, including the servants. Once assembled, Johnny took the dull scimitar from the wall.

"Mr. Nobles has asked me to show him how this murder was committed," he spoke softly, "so if you folks will step back into the places you had last night, I'll show you how I'd reconstruct the crime. Bulotti will you sit here in the chair where Rapinee sat?"

A step at a time, slowly, slowly Bulotti came forward. He sat down gingerly. The others were arranged exactly as they had been the night before. "The killer," said Johnny, "had the mate to this scimitar all sharpened and prepared. It had been ground to a razor edge."

"He came in through this window while Rapinee was engrossed in his preparations. One blow of the scimitar severed the victim's head. Like this."

He drew back the dulled blade as if to swing it. Beneath his breath he said, "Should I swing it, Bulotti? The chair is a terrible death! Imagine frying there, Bulotti, burning and smoking!"

The Italian's face did not change. Only the irises of his eyes expanded, his nostrils quivered.

"The black cord," went on Johnny, "was to be used in one of Rapinee's illusions. The killer is a mad man!"

Sotto voce, "You're mad, aren't you,

(Continued on page 110)

SALLY THE SLEUTH



Sin Ship

by
BARKER



WATCH FOR SALLY IN NEXT MONTH'S SPICY DETECTIVE



The girl was afraid of bees—and she had good reason to be, Bill decided, after what he thought was a joke led to grim death

The STUDIO



By N. WOOTEN POGE

I SWUNG past the red-head at the reception desk with a wink, carrying my own death warrant in my hand. If you think that last sounds crazy, you've got nothing on me. But it was a fact. I didn't know it was a death warrant then, of course. In fact, I was happy as a fritter, dead sure that this was the night Lulu couldn't possibly hold out against the famous Bill Carter charm.

And I was walking into a murder frame. In my hand was that death warrant, all the evidence the police would need to convict me. It was a box full of bees. Yeah, that's what I said, plain, ordinary honey bees. . . .

The red-head slid out from behind her desk and stepped into my path.

"Not tonight, dark and handsome," she grinned. "Lulu says you got to stay out."

KILLER •

I dragged her behind a column. Bobbie didn't struggle much. She panted, said, "Damn you, Bill Carter." But she didn't mean it. None of them do. She said to the boy on guard at the studio door, "Pass Don Juan."

He leered right back at her, "But not your Don Juan, eh, Bobbie?"

She laughed, real scornful. "Gawd, no," she said. "Just anybody's!"

And I went into the studio to the tune of youthful laughter. That was an unfair crack Bobbie had made. I never claimed to have much resistance where feminine charms are concerned, but then, Bobbie couldn't brag either. She'd fallen, not so long ago, for that singing louse Jack Curley, which now was nuts about Lulu, too.

Not that Lulu gave him any more of a tumble than she did me, or Oscar Carstairs, the program director. We were all snapping at her heels without any luck at all . . . until tonight. This, I was saying to myself, was Bill Carter's lucky night, thanks to this little box of bees.

IHAD found out that Lulu was crazy afraid of bees, on account of being stung badly when she was young . . . by bees, I mean. I'd make sure that one of the bees—without its sting, of course—got inside of Lulu's clothes, and there were plenty of dressing rooms about . . . with locks on the doors. Get the picture?

You can't imagine any dame, no matter how cool, calm and collected, being stand-offish about doffing a dress when there's a bee down her back. I can't imagine it either. And it's one of Bill Carter's maxims that getting a gal in that mood is nine points of possession.

I waited until Lulu had finished her last song—there would be about twenty minutes more of the program—and then

I turned loose the bees. I shook them up a little first and they came out plenty mad, humming like bullets. Several women made little squeaks, but Lulu's howl didn't come in that class. It was a scream! I dashed to the rescue, whipping my hat about her head to drive the bees away. The announcer was trying his damnedest to cover up the noise at the mike while Carstairs, the director, made frantic gestures at Lulu and me.

"This way, Lulu," I whispered. "I won't let any bees get to you!"

There was only one obstacle to our exit. Curley's little secretary-valet was in our path, jumping up and down and waving his arms in the air. He was shouting around a long cigarette holder he kept in his mouth.

"You did it!" he cried. "You did it!"

I straight-armed him out of the way, flicked my stingless bee down the low back of Lulu's dress, and grabbed the knob of a dressing room door. Lulu screamed again. I delayed a few moments to lock the door behind us, frowning about the Imp, as Curley's secretary was called. He'd damned near crabbed the act. Then I saw that Lulu wasn't waiting for my help and I stopped thinking about anything else. She slid off her shoulder straps and peeled the dress down.

"Oh, help me, Bill!" she whispered. "Help me."

Boy, would I help her! Lulu was one of those tall, cool-looking blondes with plenty of this-a and that-a to belie the coolness. The brassiere she wore was completely unnecessary! Her breasts were firm silver cups; only that's silly on account of silver being cold. No other living woman had her sheer sweet poetry of form, the round long columns of her thighs swelled into her hips.

The bee was crawling across the lower part of her back, trying to sting without a thing to sting with, and she made awkward passes at it with her hands behind her. I brushed at the bee . . . clumsily. My fingers were all thumbs . . . and Lulu . . . Lulu didn't pay any attention at all, on account of thinking about the bee. I flicked the bee off presently and stood up to take Lulu into my arms. She was trembling.

I WAS very gentle with Lulu. So far my tactics had been to attack firmly, but now it behooved me to be a kindly conqueror. A guy gets twice as much out of a little flirtation like this if he gets the other party to the transaction interested, too.

So I was very gentle with Lulu. If I knew my women, reciprocity would become the aftermath of her fear with a little encouragement. And does Bill Carter know how to encourage them? Ask me! I whispered comforting words with my mouth so close my lips teased her ear. The tingling golden tendrils of her hair drove me almost crazy. And do I love that kind of craziness!

I kept on whispering.

After a while I kissed her ear and let my lips drag across her cheek. Lulu heaved a big sigh and stopped trembling. She moved lazily in my arms and lifted her face, her big blue eyes very wide, looking at me with surprise, still a little dazed.

Now, now was my moment and I took it. I kissed her mouth, not hard at first, just little prodding movements of my lips that parted hers. She gasped, her arms tightened and her fingers slid up through my hair, dragging my head down. I held back for a moment and then I gave!

I crushed her to me, mouth to mouth,

heart to heart, breast to breast. Her arms were convulsive about my shoulders, her body twisted and lifted with writhing spasmodic movements. She gasped, made a little screaming sound that wasn't very loud and . . . she lay quietly. . . .

I couldn't understand that, not this early in the game. Her lips that had been urgent and demanding were still. I lifted my head and looked into her face and her eyes were half closed, her breasts lifted in heavy, jerky breathing that made hoarse sounds. I started to my feet, feeling cold chills race down my spine. What the devil was the matter!

Lulu sucked in a deep breath, her lovely breasts rising, rising. It came out shudderingly. She breathed once more . . . and she stopped breathing!

"Lulu!" I cried. "Lulu!"

I DON'T quite know what happened for a few moments after that. But pretty soon I began to realize that this was no place for Bill Carter, the star reporter of the *Herald*. I knew too much about police procedure to think that if I were caught in the room with this dead woman, I'd get away easily. Folks knew I'd been making passes at Lulu and that damned little Imp of Carstairs would tell about the bees. That dead white thing on the divan was no longer beauty to me. I hated it. She was death and if I was not damned careful she might mean death to me!

I don't know why I was so positive in that moment that she had been murdered. It took the police a dozen hours and an autopsy to be sure. But I knew, I knew. I slipped to the door, listened to see if anyone was outside. I locked the door behind me, thinking I was going to get away with it and then, out

of the studio across the hall, came Bea Burns. And I remembered it was Beatrice who had told me that Lulu was afraid of bees!

I reached her in two long strides, had her arm, and was shoving her out of the building fast. I didn't know when Lulu would be missed and found, but I suddenly saw my way clear to an alibi and protection. Bea was going to keep her mouth shut about the bee trick, which she had suggested, and she was going to swear I'd been with her all night before, and up to studio time. I wouldn't have had time to get the bees.

Bea kidded me, "What's the matter, hot stuff, couldn't you thaw out the big, blonde Nordic?" Bea isn't blonde or big. She's black-haired and black-eyed and she comes about up to my shoulder. But she was big enough. Yeah, man, she could hold her own!

Bea had been an interested spectator of my pursuit of Lulu, and she had come through at just the right time with help. A good-time gal like Bea hates to see a Lulu queening it over the entire masculine field. I looked at Bea and liked her. I kidded her along and tried to forget about Lulu. I succeeded for brief periods. There are times when you can't think of anything at all except what's in your arms.

I GOGGLED the next morning when I saw the newspapers. Lulu had been murdered all right. *With a poisoned bee sting!* Aconite, the poison was. It didn't kill instantaneously and one of its immediate effects was to warm the cockles of the heart, so to speak. In other words, it made a gal's temperature rise! And I had been flattering myself about the time I had made with Lulu! So far, I saw, I wasn't being hunted. Funny that nobody in the studio had seen me and

recognized me . . . or else the police were playing foxy, hoping to pick me up before I got alarmed and hid out. I shook my head over that and, suddenly, I jerked up my eyes and stared at the wall ahead. A poisoned bee sting, and Bea had put me up to releasing the bees, had even got them for me!

I forgot to mention I was in Bea's apartment when I awoke.

I reached the kitchen in two long strides. I jerked Bea around and my fingers went deep into her shoulder.

"All right, baby," I said, hearing my voice rasp: "Come clean. Where'd you get the aconite?"

I tried to shake words out of her. The negligee whipped open, but I couldn't see a thing just then, not because there wasn't plenty to see.

"You'll talk, by God," I shouted, "or I'll beat you until people run when they see your face!"

Bea whispered, "Are you crazy, Bill?"

Maybe I was just then. All I could see was that I had been dumped into a beautiful murder frame, and this was the baby that had done it. How long would it take the cops to find out I'd been with Lulu, if they didn't already know? How much longer to trace those bees to Bea and to me? Think any jury would believe a girl with Bea's pan would plot murder? Hell, no, she would be my "innocent tool." Hell, man, I know. I write that kind of stuff for the newspapers.

I tore the negligee off of Bea. She had on a chemise, one of those things of black that show more than they hide. But I slapped her. She fell down on the davenport.

"Talk!" I told her.

I'm not a woman beater, but I was scared half to death. Murder is a thing they kill you for. I slapped her again.

I got tough. Bea cussed me for a while, and after that she cried, quivering every time I whacked her. Damn it, she didn't know anything! I believed that finally. Her flesh was resilient in my grasp as I pushed her around. When I desisted, she threw her arms around my neck, quivering, quivering all over.

"Damn you, Bill," she whispered. "Damn you!" She kissed me. She *kissed* me! Well! There are some things I can't take standing up even with a murder charge staring me in the face. I was about to pick Bea up when I heard the window glass tick and break behind me.

I knew, I *knew* right then that there was death for us in the sound of break-



"All right, baby," I said. "Where'd you get the aconite?"

ing window glass. I dived over the bed and when I could look at her again, she had a hand on her shoulder and was sobbing. The room was full of bees.

SOMETHING very like terror stabbed through me. I snatched Bea's hand away and saw the black speck of a bee sting. I forgot about the bees, about the danger that might still lurk at the window and dashed for the kitchen. The window was broken, but there was nobody in sight and there wasn't time to look. I snatched a knife and raced back to Bea, slashed that damnable sting. Bea screamed and then cried.

I put my mouth to the wound, spitting out the blood and, I hoped, the poison off that bee sting. Bea stopped sobbing after a while. She did a funny thing. Her hands caressed me. Her fingers tingled along my neck. And I jumped away from her, cursing.

Me, Bill Carter! I shrank away from a loving woman! The first reactions of the bee-sting poison, the paper had said, were to make its victims affectionate! The tears were rolling down Bea's cheeks. She tried to speak and there was a gag in her throat. I gripped her in both hands.

"Darling," I whispered, hearing my voice break, "tell me quickly. Who told you Lulu was afraid of bees?"

She looked at me with dull eyes, smiled a little and sagged back against the wall. At that exact moment, a fist pounded on the door.

"Open up, Carter!" a man yelled. "You can't get away! It's the law!"

I didn't feel like laughing, but that's what I did. Murder frame. *Murder frame!* Who hated me badly enough to kill two lovely girls to accomplish that? I'd helped often enough to hang the rap on somebody that was getting away with

murder with the police. Now somebody was doing the same to me, only they were too subtle to show themselves. Well, they weren't going to hang Bill Carter! Not just yet.

I caught up my hat and with three or four wild swipes caught a couple of the bees that were still humming around the room. I had to kill them, but that wouldn't matter. I held them like that and ducked out the window whose pane had been broken onto the fire escape where somebody had stood to let those killing bees into the room.

Three stories below, a cop yelled and then started throwing lead at me. He didn't stand a chance of potting me between all those iron slats that made up the fire escape platforms and steps. I raced upward and the shouting got louder. I ducked through a window and there was a girl in bed, and was she a honey!

A man appeared from nowhere and made a pass at me and I ducked under and let him have a right cross to the jaw. He went down like Carnera and I saw the girl had heaved up on an elbow. She opened her mouth to scream and I reached her in a long jump and stopped that with a kiss. She got her hands against my chest and tried to push me away, so I got my hands on her, too. She had on a gown that was thin as a smile. I kissed her again and, if I do say it myself, when Bill Carter kisses them, they stay kissed! Maybe you think a guy can't make plans at a time like that, but I was doing just that. Man, I had to! In a damned few minutes, the police would be here after me and I had to get out first, or else. . . . Right then, the idea came to me. That cop down below hadn't been sure what window I came in, and . . .

I LET the girl breathe for a while and she was panting. Her hands were still on my chest, but they weren't pushing so hard.

"Damn you," she whispered. "Damn you, this is an outrage!"

I grinned and just brushed her mouth with mine. "Not yet, honeychile," I assured her.

I grabbed the guy on the floor and laid him gently in a closet which I locked, then I went to the front door and pretended to make sure it was locked. What I did was unlock it.

"We don't want any interruptions," I told the girl, coming back.

She was standing by the bed with a little black gun stuck out stiffly in front of her. She wasn't smiling, but she was still panting and I knew damned well she'd liked those kisses. They always like mine. I walked up to her.

"That shooting," she whispered. "You're a crook. They were after you!"

"And I'm after you, honeychile!"

"If you touch me . . . Go away! I'll shoot you, I swear I will!"

I didn't try to evade the gun. I let it push into my chest, and I had the reach of her. I stretched out my arm and my fingers could do a little more than touch. Her hair was long and blonde and fell in a tangled mass about her shoulders. That was about all the covering she had unless you count the silk nightgown which was pretty well gone by now.

"I'll shoot you. I swear I will!" she whispered.

"Go ahead, honeychile, it's worth it!"

"Oh . . . don't!"

I took the gun out of her fingers and tossed it on the bed. "If you want the gun," I whispered, "you'll have to get in bed!"

WHEN the cops burst in through the unlocked door, I jumped up and crouched behind a sheet that hid half my face.

"Damn you, Elise!" I yelled at the girl. "This is a frame! You swore it wasn't a frame, and . . ."

The cop in front looked at the girl. She rolled her head languidly and looked at him and didn't seem to care whether he was there or not. The cop bellowed with laughter.

"Don't worry, Buddy. This ain't no vice raid."

IT was hours later when I left and the guy had been thumping at the door of the closet for hours. "By the way," I said at the door of the apartment as I pried the girl off again. "By the way, who was the guy I socked?"

She grimaced. "Don't worry about him. I'll tell him you pointed a gun at me and I was helpless."

"Yeah, but who is he?"

She giggled. "My husband!"

I went out fast and there wasn't a cop in sight. I took the bees to a chemist friend of mine and he looked over the stings. There wasn't any aconite on them.

"Besides," he said, talking fast because he wanted me to get out of there, "it's a damned fool way to commit a murder. If aconite was put on all the bee stings, they might kill anybody. And if it was put on only one, as it seems here, how in the hell did the murderer make the bee sting the one he wanted?"

And that was a poser. In Bea's apartment, it might not make any difference which one of us was killed, but in the radio studio, it was something else again. I thought that over as I sneaked through the dark streets, trying to get a hunch that would clear me of that murder frame which had been smashed around my neck.

I was tired and mad clear through. It wasn't just the frame.

I'd been nuts about Lulu and Bea was a sweet kid. . . . I stopped dead in the street, staring at nothing and a taxi damned near ran over me. I hopped into it and flung an address at the driver. My brain was going so fast I was dizzy, and the Carter mind can stand some speed, what I mean.

Bea had been killed not to tighten the frame around me, but to *keep her from talking!* It was plain as the pain of a bee sting. Somebody had told her about Lulu's weakness for bees. Bea had been killed to keep her from telling me who that was, and I had been too dumb to ask her while she could still talk!

It wasn't easy to think up who would have told Bea that. She had a load of friends and acquaintances. The thing to do was find the one who might have told Bea and who knew that circumstance about Lulu. Neither Bea nor Lulu could help there, and there wasn't any time at all. Any traffic cop I passed on the street might pick me up.

The taxi jerked up before a big house in the East Sixties, and I bamboozled a scientist I had interviewed recently into handing over a big box full of bees. He was much puzzled about it, but it was pretty plain he hadn't read the newspapers. My next stop was the radio studios.

IT just happened that the program on which Lulu sang was one of those affairs that ran two consecutive nights and it was a pretty safe bet that everybody who had been there the night before would repeat, except the casual visitors, of course, and I didn't expect to find my guilty man among them. It was still a couple of hours before the show, but I had plenty to do.

A pretty good hunch as to how Lulu and Bea had been killed had come to me and I had at least a couple of suspects.

Curley, the handsome singer, and Cartairs who had almost got the program directorship. They were both crazy about Lulu and either might have killed her out of jealousy on seeing her go for me.

But that theory had a flaw. The murder had been committed by someone with prescience enough to plant the bee information with Bea so I would get it . . . which made it a little tougher. I had a plan, but I'd need a little help.

I detached the red-head, Bobbie, from her desk without much trouble, though she was badly scared.

"Bill, if they catch you here, they'll probably kill you without waiting for the police," she said anxiously.

I drew her into a dressing room. "So we won't take any chances," I told her. "You'll call the police and tell them I'm here."

"Oh, no, Bill! I wouldn't do that!"

"Not even for me?"

"For you, Bill? But they'll arrest you!"

I caught hold of the silken scarf that was part of her dress, tugged her toward me. "They'll electrocute me," I whispered. "But after half an hour with you. . . ."

She slapped me, pretty hard, across the face and laughed. "Don't be silly, Bill."

I shook my head. "After a while, Bobbie, I'm going to die, because no other girl would be worth a damn."

She said, "Silly." But she was pleased. She didn't slap me when I pulled on the tie again. Funny it came untied and loosened the low V of her throat.

Funny business for a guy who's about to spring a trap on a murderer, you'll say, for a guy who's maybe going to face



*She had been deathly afraid
of bees . . . and to her, bees
were death!*

that murder rap himself if he doesn't make a good job of his trap? Hell, I know what I'm doing. I always do. . . . The red-head knows what I'm doing all right, but not what I'm thinking. Lucky thing for me she didn't!

I got my fingers in red-head's hair, shook her a little, before I pulled her face up.

I WOULDN'T let her mouth come close to mine, just teased her with little half-kisses and she damned near pulled her hair out trying to get near. She was a red-head all right. . . . Presently, she wrapped her arms around my neck. I let go of her hair and let my

fingers trickle down her satiny arms, and then I trickled back up again.

Red-head couldn't have snuggled closer to me. That was what I thought. Then I brushed her cheeks with my fingers and I found out differently. She panted out curses while she bit at my lips. She didn't like the idea of responding so easily but couldn't help herself.

When we left I made just one stop on our way to the studio where the show was on, and that was to catch up my bee box. I pushed Red-head into the studio where the show was on, slid along the wall to the right and dumped the box to the floor.

We had hit the show at just about the

same time at which, the night before, the bees had cut loose and preluded the death of Lulu in my arms. It was what is laughingly known as the psychological moment. The first bee hummed into the air and, the same instant, a woman screamed. Within a half second, the panic was on. Collapsible chairs slammed to the floor, screams and shouts drowned out the orchestra which was trying frantically to quiet the uproar.

I jumped to a chair against the wall and stared out over the mass of scrambling people. Not any doubt about the fear in their flight. I searched out Curley and Carstairs and they were both running for dear life. And I had my eyes on them from the first moment the bees took off. They were really frightened. I knew that and it put a crimp in my plans.

It was at just that moment that the big sound-proof doors of the studio swung wide and a squad of cops started mauling their way in. So that was what Red-head was waiting for!

It was at that moment that I saw Curley's secretary-valet, the guy known as the Imp. He had his big pipe in his mouth, but he had detached the bowl. He wasn't frightened at all, and he was looking over the crowd with keen, ready eyes. I saw that and I did a nosedive for the floor. I knew who he was looking for and I knew what would happen if he found me.

I went through the crowd like a football player on an open field. This was the break I had worked for, and I was going to make sure of its success. A fat man got in my way and I didn't try to knock him aside.

I HIT him, head-on, in the midriff and he hurtled into the Imp and buried him under two hundred and seventy

pounds of fat. The Imp's pipestem flew from his hand and I scrambled after it just about the time that Sergeant Pilsuski spotted me. He let out a bull roar and waded forward. He was pretty good at wading, too. He reached me before I could get the pipestem or get to my feet.

A woman's white hand shot out and grabbed the pipestem and I decided not to get to my feet. Instead I got my legs under me and tackled. I grabbed her just below the knees and my arms and her skirts went into a flurry and I was staring down into Red-head's terrified face.

I held her wrists and dragged her to her feet. I laughed at her. I was sore. "I've had two girls shot out by those damned bee stings, but this one isn't going to be."

Sergeant Pilsuski grabbed me by the coat collar and when he grabs, something gives. It was my hold on Red-head.

"For God's sake, Pilsuski!" I shouted at him. "Listen to reason! I've tossed favors your way, now wait a minute."

Pilsuski doesn't think very fast. He was panting from his wading expedition and more cops were rolling up every minute.

"Listen, Pilsuski!" I yelled, "the bees didn't kill anybody! It was a thing like a blow-gun dart, a bee-sting with a backing of gelatine that would melt, that was blown like a native in South America kills things. Lulu was killed because she stole a girl's boy friend. Lulu didn't want the boy, but she had him anyway."

"This girl tipped off Bea that Lulu was afraid of bees and maybe a fellow with leanings that way could get her through the bees and then he'd have more for Bea."

"She worked through the secretary-valet of the man she loved and told him it was for his master's good. He'd do anything for his master, who had saved

his life in a street shooting once and given him an easy berth. I'll tell you how I know it. I turned loose some bees that couldn't hurt anybody in this studio tonight and the only persons who weren't scared of those bees were the Imp and this Red-head. They both know that the bees had never hurt anybody."

"Look out, Pilsuski!"

I did a diving tackle again, but Bobbie didn't try to shoot me or Pilsuski with the poison dart. She blew it into the inside of her left elbow just before we went down to the floor. I jerked the damned sting out, but I knew it was too late. It had been too late for Bea. Bobbie looked up into my face and smiled a little.

"This aconite stirs one up so," she murmured. "How about a kiss? Just one, Bill. Afterwards . . ."

I felt tears in my eyes. Damn it, this girl had caused the death of two lovely women to get rid of riva's and I was crying because she was dying. But she was game, dead game. . . . And it is a

hell of a note to be a woman and love a man and have him chuck you over for another dame that doesn't give a whoop about him.

"Hey, that guy you call the Imp is dead," Pulsuski massages my shoulder with his finger. "He got a neck broke when you bowled him over."

Bobbie grins past me at Pilsuski. "We did those killings, captain," she says. "I planned them and the Imp did them. . . ." She stopped looking at him, her eyes were getting very bright. She touched her tongue to her lips. "Bill," she whispered.

God, I'd had two women die in my arms within twenty-four hours and here was another. She was panting. I bent to her lips. When it was over, I guess I didn't stand too steadily on my feet because Pilsuski held me up.

"Boy, are you good!" he grinned. "You kiss them to death."

I laughed and it sounded as crazy as a woman's. "Sure . . . sure," I grinned. "It's my fatal charm." I got out of there fast.

NEXT MONTH—

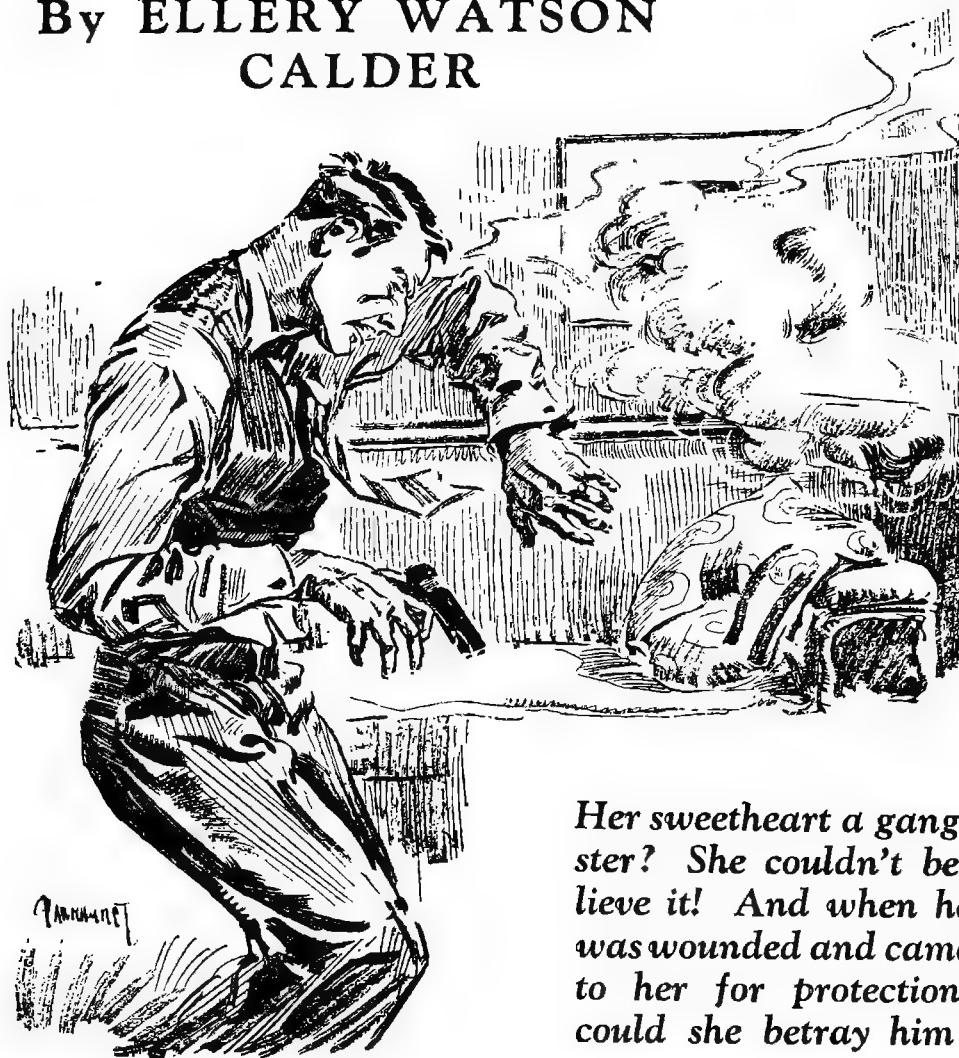
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CALDER



Her sweetheart a gangster? She couldn't believe it! And when he was wounded and came to her for protection, could she betray him?

BULLETS at

KITTY DORAN stared unbelievably at her blue-coated older brother, Police Sergeant Dan Doran. "Dan!" she whispered. "You're wrong! You've *got* to be wrong! Steve Callahan is no gangster! He couldn't be!"

Sergeant Dan Doran looked grave.

"Sorry, sis. Facts are facts. Your sweetheart, Steve Callahan, is very definitely tied up with Foxy Peterson's mob. Our central-office stoolies have given us all the dope—and it's straight dope, too. Steve has been hanging out at the Peterson headquarters in Bledsoe's roadhouse. You know what that means. Sooner or



*A shot rang out and
Kitty whirled, screaming,
to the window. There
was Dan Doran of the
police.*

BLEDSOE'S

later we'll be putting the arm on Steve for some underworld deviltry or other. You can't have yourself tied up to a crook, sis. You've got to give Steve the gate."

"But—I can't do that! I love him, Dan! And we're going to be married! Besides. . ." her voice faltered.

Kitty's brother narrowed his hard, glacial eyes. His gaze seemed to bore into Kitty's very soul. "Kitty!" he exclaimed sharply. "Have you and Steve Callahan . . . ?"

She flushed and looked away. "Y-yes, Dan. We've . . . meant everything to each other. I'm his wife in everything

but name." Then she squared her lovely shoulders, so that her nubile breasts pouted outward through her frock, arrogantly feminine. She brushed back her auburn hair. "And what of it, Dan? I love him!"

A bitter light came into her brother's eyes. "The rat!" he whispered. "The dirty rat! I'll kill him!"

"No, Dan. You won't harm him—because I love him; and you wouldn't make your own sister unhappy. If anything happened to Steve, I—I think I'd kill myself!"

Dan Doran did not answer. He turned on his heel and strode grimly out of Kitty's ground-floor apartment.

AND when he had gone, Kitty choked back the sob that arose in her flawless throat. Steve—Steve Callahan—the man she loved—was a gangster! The man to whom she had given her heart was a member of Foxy Peterson's mob of underworld gunmen and racketeers! It was unbelievable. And yet her own brother, Sergeant Dan, had told her so—and Dan wouldn't lie to her about a thing like that!

Kitty's hands pressed against her swelling breasts. Only last night, Steve Callahan had held her in his arms, kissed her until she had panted with an engulfing, sultry warmth. . . . He had bruised her lips with the ardor of his caresses.

And Steve was a gangster, an outlaw . . . !

DUSK had now fallen. Numbly, Kitty removed her dress, her brassiere, her filmy panties. She wanted to plunge under a shower, to wash away and erase the memory of Steve's caresses—the caresses of a gangster! As she stood there, utterly nude, her mirror reflected the perfection of her delicious loveli-

ness. Firm, rounded breasts. Soft white body, lavishly curved. Swelling, arched hips; cream-smooth thighs; tapered legs and slim ankles. . . .

Abruptly, as Kitty started for the bathroom, she heard a series of staccato sounds punctuating the outer night. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* like the drumming beat of a pneumatic riveter. Metallic impacts bashed against the front wall of the apartment, screaming weirdly as leaden slugs ricochetted in the darkness.

Machine-gun fire!

The sounds ceased as suddenly as they had commenced. For a moment, the silence was oppressively heavy, ominous. And then Kitty whirled, tense with a fear that drained her cheeks of color. Someone was pounding desperately at her front door!

Snatching up a negligee and slipping her arms into it, Kitty made for the portal, unlocked it, threw it open. A man staggered in, swayed past her, collapsed in a sprawling heap in the middle of the room. Blood seeped redly from a dark hole in the shoulder of his coat.

"Steve! Steve—" Kitty wailed. And she smashed the door shut, bolted it, and ran to where her sweetheart had fallen. She went to her knees beside his prone figure.

As she lifted his head, cradled it in her lap, ne opened his eyes and looked up at her. Outside, there sounded the whine of a high-powered car hurtling away in second gear. "Steve!" Kitty whispered once more. "It's all right. Y-you're safe now. Th-they've gone. . . ."

Blood was seeping from Steve Callahan's shoulder, staining the carpet under him. He moved, listlessly. For a brief moment, Kitty left him while she raced into the bathroom. Softly she breathed a prayer of thanks that she was a trained

nurse—and that she was at present on a three-day holiday from the hospital where she was employed. Now she procured a basin full of warm water, together with a towel and some gauze bandages.

She had forgotten what Dan, her brother, had told her; no longer did she think of Steve as a gangland outlaw. She knew only that she loved him—that he was hurt—that she must help him.

Returning from the bathroom, she found him already on his feet, swaying unsteadily. "You—you needn't bother with that stuff," he smiled. "I'm all right. Just a flesh wound."

But she paid him no heed; or did she stop to notice that her negligee had gaped open in front, displaying glimpses of her enticingly-nude breasts to his gaze. Swiftly, professionally, she removed his coat, tore away the blood-stained shirt from his wounded shoulder. The machine-gun slugs had passed cleanly through the flesh of his upper arm; and it took Kitty just a moment to disinfect it, pack it, bandage it with gauze and absorbent.

AS HER fingers busied themselves at the task, Kitty's heart seemed weighted with lead. There could be only one answer to this entire affair. Dan, her brother, had been right! Otherwise, why should he have been the target for a gangster's tommy-gun?

And yet, even with that knowledge pressing down upon her, she could not find the courage to resist him when he took her into his arms, kissed her lips. . . . His uninjured hand strayed to her cheek, ran lightly over her face; and the touch of his seeking fingers sent darting thrills through her. Abruptly, she knew she didn't care if Steve was a gangster, an outlaw; she knew only that

she was his woman, through heaven or hell, from now until eternity. . . .

"Kitty—darling—" he was whispering as he drew her toward the waiting divan. . . .

And then, interrupting that ecstatic interlude, they heard heavy footfalls coming down the corridor outside the apartment!

Steve Callahan tensed. "If they've come back for me, they'll do a better job this time!" he whispered. Then: "God—why did I have to come here and drag you into this mess? Why did they have to crack down on me just as I was coming to visit you?"

Kitty placed a hand over his lips. Those approaching footsteps were coming nearer, nearer. . . . Kitty leaned close to Steve's ear. "Gangsters?" she whispered the single query.

He nodded, moved. A sudden grimace of pain contorted his tanned face as he tried to move his wounded left arm. Despite his courage, the agony of that wound was beginning to tell on him. He looked pale—

"Come! Quick!" Kitty whispered. She led him into her own bedroom, made him lie on the bed. Then she ran from the room, locking the door behind her. At the same instant, there sounded a sharp, staccato knocking at the apartment's front door.

Kitty paled. Swiftly, she gathered up the basin of blood-stained water, the roll of gauze bandages; raced them into the bathroom. Some of the basin's water spilled on the white-tiled floor. The window was partly open. Kitty dashed the crimson water out into the night; heard it splash on the pavement of the alley outside. Then she shoved the empty basin and the gauze bandages out of sight under the bathtub.

Again she heard that preemptory rapping at the front door. She ran toward it; threw back the bolt. The portal opened. A man stepped into the living-room.

HE HAD sharp, rat-like features; his eyes were slit-like. For a single silent instant that seemed like eternity, his gaze licked at Kitty's body through her diaphanous negligee; took in the swelling white hillocks of her breasts, the lyric curves of her hips and thighs... Then he spoke, in a high, nasal whine that held a timbre of venom:

"Hi, baby," he said. "Where's Steve?"

"I—I don't know wh-what you mean," Kitty lied.

He grinned harshly. "The hell you don't! My pal, Steve Callahan, just ducked into this stash. A bunch of hoods were tryin' to use him for a clay pigeon. He ran in here. If you want me to prove it, there's his bloodstains on your carpet. Now, come clean, beautiful. Where is Steve, an' how bad is he hurt?"

Kitty's thoughts raced. No question but what the ferret-eyed man was a gangster. But was he lying about being Steve's friend? Wasn't it likely that he was an enemy who had come to finish the job of murder?

She decided to brazen it out with another lie. "If you mean the man who was wounded and ran in here," she said, "he's not here now. He ran through my apartment and got away through my bathroom window, which was open. Look for yourself—you can see the trail of blood he left."

The rat-faced man stepped into the bathroom, peered at the blood on the tiled floor, then at the open window.

Suddenly he heard a sound behind him; and he whirled, with a deadly-looking automatic in his fist. "Who's that?" he snarled.

Kitty, too, had heard the sound. Someone was pounding on her front door!

"Answer it, an' don't try any tricks, kiddo!" the ferret-eyed man whispered harshly. "Remember, I'll be standin' here behind the bathroom door, with a roscoe in my mitt! An' I ain't worried about pluggin' a dame, see?"

Kitty nodded wordlessly. Again came that thunderous summons on the closed front door of the flat. "Open up!" a voice barked. "It's the police!"

Kitty went white. The police—and Steve Callahan, wounded, lay in her bedroom while another gangster was concealed in her bathroom! If the cops discovered the presence of either of those men . . . !

HER knees felt weak as she opened the front door. Three blue-clad coppers entered. "Where's the man who got shot?" the leader demanded. Then he stiffened in surprise. "Why—for the love of Mike, you're Sergeant Doran's sister!"

Kitty forced a smile to her kissable lips. She thought fast. She did not know what charges might possibly be hanging over Steve's head. . . . She had but one dangerous alternative: she must sacrifice the ferret-eyed man in her bathroom!

And she knew, even before she spoke, that she might be voicing her own death-warrant. When she sent the police to the bathroom, the ferret-eyed man would doubtlessly carry out his original threat. He would shoot Kitty, before he was captured!



"You didn't hit me hard enough to keep me asleep long," Peterson rasped. "And now it's my turn to play games!"

Yet there was no hesitation in Kitty's mind. Her love for Steve stiffened her courage to the ultimate self-sacrifice. She spoke—and steeled herself for the impact of an automatic's soft-nosed slug. . . .

"A—a wounded man broke into my apartment just now and ran into my b-bathroom. . ." she said.

The bluecoats pulled out their service revolvers, leaped at the bathroom's closed door. "Come out of there—and no funny stuff!" the leading copper shouted.

Kitty waited for the door to smash

open; waited for the ferret-eyed man to appear with blazing automatic. Instead, there came no sound. Then one of the bluecoats kicked open the bathroom portal and stared inside.

The room was empty!

The open window mutely disclosed how the ferret-eyed gangster had made his escape. A cop flashed his torch through the window, sprayed the alley with white light. "He went this way, men! I can see bloodstains and footprints! Come on—let's get going!"

The trio of uniformed men squeezed one at a time through the open window,

went pelting down the black alley. Once more alone, Kitty returned to her living-room. She felt weak, spent. And then, suddenly, she froze.

A FAINT groan had emanated from her bedroom—from behind the locked door!

Kitty unlocked the door swiftly. If anyone had heard that groan, Steve was lost! As she swayed into the darkened bedroom, she saw Steve striving weakly to sit up on the bed's edge. He looked up at her. "Must—get away—" he whispered wryly.

In desperation, Kitty acted. At all costs, she must keep Steve here—and keep him silent! If she permitted him to leave in his present weakened condition, he would fall easy prey either to the police or to his gangster enemies who sought his life. Yet if he remained here in her apartment, he must do so soundlessly. Even the tiniest groan might betray him, in case the cops or some gangsters came back here. . . .

Kitty went to a drawer, drew forth a hypodermic syringe. She steadied her hand as she dissolved a tablet in water, filled the hypo with the narcotic solution. "Be still!" she whispered gently to Steve. And she plunged the needle into his aching, wounded arm.

"Shouldn't—do that—!" he grunted. "I've got—to get away—"

"No! You're staying here until the danger is over!" Kitty answered him firmly, tenderly. She pressed him back on the bed; and to quiet him until the narcotic took effect, she sat down beside him. Daringly, she let the front of her negligee gap open in the darkness of the room; allowed him to rest his cheek against the warmth of her flesh. . . . She knew that her nearness, his love for

her, would soothe him until he sank into drugged sleep. . . .

His face against the soft sweetness of her, the feel of his arms drowsily going around her waist . . . all combined to send thrill after aching thrill through Kitty's soul. She pressed his head fiercely against her, fused herself to him. . . .

Then, slowly, Steve Callahan relaxed and grew limp as the hypo-injection took full effect. He slept. . . .

QUIETLY, so that she would not disturb him, Kitty crept from the room. She closed and locked the door. She turned—and it seemed as if her blood turned to ice—

"Hello, gorgeous! I'm here again!" a nasal rasping voice spoke.

Kitty stared at the ferret-eyed gangster who had escaped from her bathroom just a short while before.

He chuckled. "I ducked out—took it on the lam when I heard them shamuses at your front door. Then I stuck around until I was sure they were out of the road. Now I'm back—an' I'm after Steve Callahan!"

"He—he's not here! I told you that before!"

"Nuts, baby." The man stepped close to Kitty; his arm shot out, encircled her waist, pulled her toward him. She shuddered as his insolent arms drew her closer. "I like you, kiddo," he grinned. "I could go for you in a big way. And you're a game sport. But don't try to fool me. You got Callahan here somewhere. Don't try to lie to Foxy Peterson."

"Foxy Peterson . . . ?" Kitty whispered, staring at him.

"Sure I am, sweetness. An' I just seen that bloody basin under your bath-

tub. You helped Callahan, an' you've still got him here. Well, fork him over. Steve's a friend of mine—a member of my mob, see? I got a fast jalopy outside, an' I'll take Steve out to my headquarters at Bledsoe's Tavern where he can get properly attended to."

Kitty's heart sank. Then it was true. Steve really was a member of Peterson's mob. Even though the knowledge numbed her, and hurt her, she was glad for one thing; Since this ferret-eyed man was Foxy himself, then he certainly meant to do no harm to Steve. Steve would probably be safer with the gang-leader than he would be here in her apartment . . .

"I—I'll let you take him," she mumbled. "He's in my bedroom. I gave him a hypo to ease his pain and keep him quiet. He's unconscious from the effects of the drug. We'll have to carry him to your car. You're sure . . . no police are . . . watching?"

"Leave it to me, baby. I got lookouts posted. The coast is clear, all right." Foxy grinned thinly.

And so Kitty unlocked her bedroom door; helped the gang leader lift Steve from the bed. Steve opened his glazed, drug-dulled eyes for a single instant. "Foxy . . . !" he gasped.

"Yeah. It's me, your old pal. You're okay, Steve, old boy. I'll take care of you." And the gangster shouldered Steve's limp form.

To Kitty, it seemed that part of her very heart went with Steve. Because she knew that she would never see him again. She must not ever see him again! She owed that much loyalty to her brother Dan. She was a cop's sister, and she could not consort with criminals. . . .

WEARILY, Kitty threw herself on the bed where Steve had been just a few short moments ago. She buried her face in the pillow where his head had lain—

Something small, hard, metallic, touched her cheek. She reached out her hand, picked it up. She switched on the lights, stared at the object—and her face went white.

The thing was a badge—a gold badge, pinned to a leather holder. It was the badge of a United States Secret Service operative—a G-man!

It must have fallen from Steve's pocket as he lay on the bed. And now, with brutal, overwhelming suddenness, Kitty realized the truth!

Steve was a government operative! That was why he had been running around with the Peterson mob!

Kitty saw the whole thing with blinding clarity. Foxy himself must have been behind that machine-gun attack tonight! Somehow, the gangster must have learned that Steve was a G-man, and had put Steve "on the spot." When Steve had escaped that leaden death-hail of tommy-gun slugs, Foxy had trailed him to this apartment to finish the job. . . .

"Oh, God!" Kitty moaned in terror. "They'll kill him—!" She clenched her tiny fists in bitter agony.

And what must Steve think, before he died at Peterson's hands? Steve would think Kitty a traitor, because she had drugged him and delivered him to his enemies!

"It can't be! It mustn't be!" Kitty whispered frantically. "Steve isn't dead yet! And I've got to save him—"

Quivering, tense, she flung herself into a frock, raced from the apartment, hurled herself into her own little coupe. Bledsoe's Tavern, on the outskirts of

town—that was Peterson's gang headquarters. Kitty must reach that road-house before it was too late. . . .

Desperately she lanced the little coupe onward through the night. It was late, now, and dark with an ominous darkness. Dread fingers of fear clutched at Kitty's heart as she drove. Her lips moved in a soundless prayer that she would reach Bledsoe's Tavern in time. And then, after what seemed agonized hours, she drew up before the road-house.

SHE leaped from her machine, pattered toward the trellised portico. A pock-faced gorilla stepped up to her. "What's the rush, baby? Goin' somewhere in a hurry?"

"Peterson—Foxy Peterson—I've got to see him—talk to him!" Kitty choked out.

The gorilla appraised the nubile curves of her body with admiring eyes. "No soap, kiddo. Foxy's busy just now. He ain't got no time for floozies tonight."

"But—I've got to see him! Tell him it's the red-haired girl from the apartmen he visited a while ago. . . ."

"We-e-ell," the gorilla looked doubtful, "I'll go give him your message. But you're wastin' your time. Foxy's gonna be busy for a while." And he turned and shambled off into the tavern.

Kitty's heart constricted. She knew what the pock-faced man had meant. Peterson was going to be busy—murdering Steve Callahan! If he had not already done so . . . !

Abruptly, a thought came to Kitty. Just inside the tavern entrance she spotted a pay-station telephone. Swiftly she went inside, dropped a dime, dialed a number. Soon a well-remembered voice came floating over the wire. Her brother's voice. . . .

"Dan! This is Kitty. I'm at Bledsoe's Tavern. Come quick—and bring some of your men. . . ."

She did not wait for her brother's startled demand for explanations. She hung up, turned, raced back into the night. She was just in time to see the pock-faced gorilla emerging from a side exit.

"Foxy said it was okay to bring you up to his office," the man said with a leer. "Come on."

HE LED her to the side entrance, took her up a long, narrow flight of uncarpeted stairs. Then he knocked on a closed door and said: "I got the dame here, boss."

The door opened. Foxy Peterson stood there. "Frisk her, Butch," he commanded tersely.

The pock-faced gorilla ran his hands intimately over Kitty's body; patted her hips, dipped his fingers insolently into the vee of her dress. Then he stepped back, grinning. "She ain't carryin' no roscoe, chief."

"Okay. Get out, Butch."

The pock-faced hood departed. Foxy took Kitty's arm, drew her into the room, closed and locked the door. He smiled. "What's botherin' you, george?"

She stood before him, imploringly, beseechingly. "Mr. Peterson—Foxy—I want to know what you've done to Steve Callahan . . . ?"

The gangster chieftain's vicious face grew hard, cold. "What's it to you?" he rasped.

"I've got to know. Have you . . . killed him?"

"Not yet," Peterson grinned, displaying yellowed teeth repugnantly. "I'm waitin' for that hypo to wear off, so he'll know what's happenin' to him. The

double-crossin' Federal rat!" he suddenly grew venomous. "I'm gonna fry his tootsies before I rub him out! I'm gonna make him tell me just how much he found out about me!"

Kitty threw herself at the gangster. "No—no!" she whispered desperately.



"Let him go! Don't . . . hurt him! Let him go, and I'll do anything you ask . . ."

"Anything? Such as what, baby?"

"You—you said, tonight in my apartment, that you . . . liked me. Well . . . you can have me, if you'll release Steve Callahan!" Frantically, Kitty gripped at the neck of her frock and tore the garment downward, baring herself to the waist, except for the expanse inadequately covered by a brassiere. Then she forced herself to stand there, half naked, before the gang chief's beady-eyed gaze. Deliberately she pivoted, letting him see her from all sides. "Am I worth it, Foxy?" she whispered.

*"Steve! Steve!"
Kitty wailed as the
man staggered past
her and collapsed.*

"God!" the gangster licked his lips. And then, as if overwhelmed by frenzied desire, he swept her off her feet, carried her over to a couch. His lips glued to her unwilling mouth as he lowered her among the cushions. He kissed her naked shoulders, the hollow of her throat; and his kisses sent cold nausea through Kitty's veins. Yet she steeled herself to go through with it—for Steve's sake. . . .

She writhed with mental as well as physical torture. But she must go through with it!

She closed her eyes to shut out the ultimate degradation. (Blinded her mind to all that was happening to her. After all, what did it matter—so long as Steve's life was spared by her sacrifice?)

LONG moments later he released her. "You ain't bad, baby. I think I'm gonna like you plenty!" he laughed.

And then, from the doorway, a harsh voice said: "Stick 'em up, Peterson!"

The gangster leaped backward, whirled. Kitty swayed to her feet and stared. "Steve—Steve!" she gasped out.

The grim-eyed Callahan flicked her with a stinging, contemptuous glance. But he kept his automatic trained at Peterson. "So that's the way things are between you and this mobster, eh," Steve flung at Kitty.

She flushed. "Steve—you don't understand—"

"I don't want to understand. I can see what's been going on." Callahan approached Peterson. "As to you—you thought I was still unconscious from the effects of the hypo which your girl-friend, here, shot into me. But I've got a strong constitution. I came out of it sooner than you expected. You had a hood guarding me, but I caught him with

his pants down. I bashed him with a candlestick, and took his automatic away from him. It's the roscoe I'm aiming at you now, Peterson—and if you make one false move, I'll drill you!"

"You won't get by with this, you lousy dick!" Foxy snarled. "I got twenty hoods parked around this joint—"

"If they start anything, I'll kill you first, Peterson!"

Kitty stepped forward desperately. "Steve—you can't think that I gave that hypo to you, just to double-cross you? Surely you can't believe I was in league with Peterson and his gangsters—"

His bitter glance swept over her. "What else is there for me to think? I even find you in Peterson's private office, half naked—!"

His glance at her was Steve's undoing. In the split instant of his inattention, Foxy Peterson came to life; sprang at the G-man's throat.

Kitty smothered the scream that came to her lips; realized that if she made any sound, it might bring Peterson's mob in full force. Wide-eyed, she watched as Foxy bashed himself at Steve. She saw their bodies impact sickeningly. Saw Peterson's fist thud home against the jaw of the man she loved. Saw Steve go reeling backward as Peterson knocked the automatic out of his hand. . . .

The weapon hit the floor and went off. Its roaring explosion sounded like the crack o' doom. Acrid smoke bit at Kitty's nostrils. She saw Foxy Peterson bearing Steve backward, tripping him, overpowering him—

WITH a frightened wail, Kitty hurled herself at the fallen automatic, grabbed it. She raised it and smashed it down with all her might upon Foxy's skull.

The gangster collapsed, and blood

seeped redly from his forehead, where the automatic had crunched down. He lay still.

Steve stared. "Kitty—you—why did you do that to him? I thought . . . you were in love with him! I thought you were his moll . . ."

"Can't you realize the truth?" she whimpered. "I found your badge under my pillow at home, and I realized that I had handed you over to your enemies. I—I came here to try to save you! I even . . ."

Steve came toward her, his eyes wide. "You . . . did that . . . for me . . . ?" he muttered.

And then, before she could answer, there came a clattering thunder of footfalls outside, in the corridor. That would be Foxy's mob, summoned by the sound of the automatic going off, a moment before! They were coming to the aid of their fallen leader—

Callahan, still blurry from the effects of that hypo and his battle with Peterson, forced himself erect. "Here they come!" he rasped. "We're in for it now!"

He grabbed the automatic from Kitty's fist, trained it at the closed door of the little room. He squeezed the trigger, sent a scalding slug through the portal. "If you come in here, you get rubbed out!" he roared.

Then he dived at Kitty, dragging her down on the floor beside him. "Keep low! They'll start shooting now!" he grated.

Even as he spoke, a ripping barrage of tommy-gun slugs came tearing through the thin wooden door; and out in the corridor, a hell of noise broke loose as the stuttering, chattering machine-guns spat hot leaden death.

FROM the floor, Steve emptied the clip of his automatic; sent a hell's tattoo of bullets through the door. Abruptly, the firing outside came to a halt.

"They—they're going away!" Kitty whispered.

"It's a trick. They're hoping to lure us out, so that they can jump us," Steve answered grimly. "If only there was another roscoe in this room—"

From behind him, a voice snarled: "Yeah! There *is* another roscoe in the room—I'm gonna use it to bump you both!"

Kitty and Steve turned; and saw Foxy swaying to his feet. He leered at Kitty. "You didn't hit me hard enough to keep me asleep very long, baby. Now it's my turn to play games!"

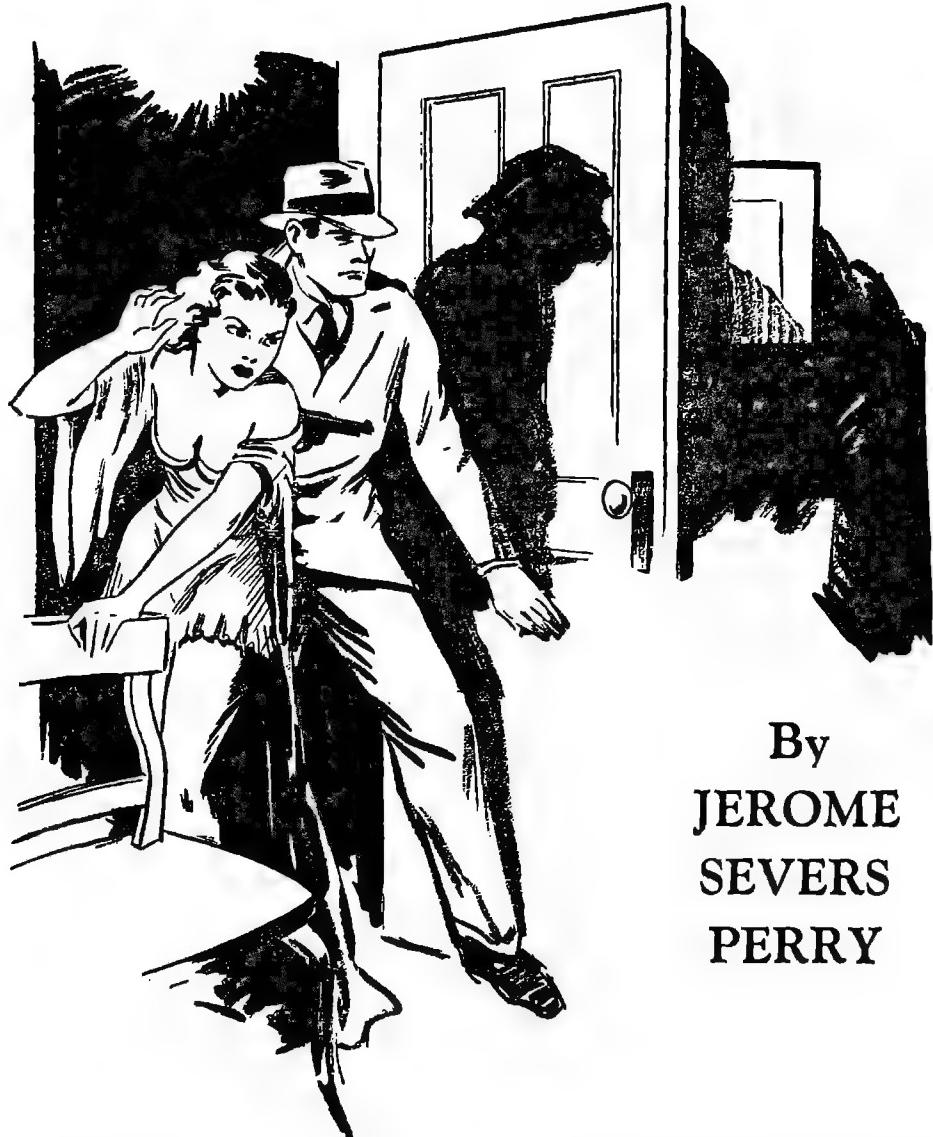
The gangster had pulled his own gun from a shoulder-holster. Now he trained it at Kitty's breast. His knuckles whitened on the trigger—

A shot rang out. Kitty screamed; and then her eyes went wide. She had felt no pain. . . . Instead, a queer, glazed expression had come to Peterson's eyes. He was falling, slumping . . . ! There was a round hole in his temple . . . !

Kitty whirled, stared at the room's single window. At the open aperture she saw a face. A man was entering through the window, clambering in from the top of a ladder set against the building. And the man was Kitty's own brother, Sergeant Dan Doran of the police!

Dan held a smoking service .38 in his fist. He looked down at Foxy Peterson's sprawled corpse. "Looks like I got here just in time to kill that guy!" Dan grunted. Then he faced his auburn haired, half-naked sister. "Maybe this will teach

(Continued on page 114)



By
JEROME
SEVERS
PERRY

SIX INCHES

SHE was a tall, willowy red-head. Detective-sergeant Bill Senff saw her standing on the porch of the big suburban Colonial house. As he wheeled his official sedan into the drive-

way, his headlights broomed through the rain-spattered night. For an instant the twin tunnels of light sprayed over her.

She was standing at the edge of the

Sneff had come here for just one purpose—to guard a man's life. And he failed! He hated to accuse the girl of stabbing a man in the back—yet what else could he believe?

"You damned slut—stick me with a knife, will you!"



OF STEEL

porch, oblivious to the rain. The pelting drops, wind-driven and stinging, had soaked through her thin, expensive negligee. The gauze-like material clung to the firm outward swells of her lush

breasts; limned the supple contours of her hips and thighs. In that brief instant of light, her face showed up pale, frightened. Her carmine lips were a blood-like splash against the pallor of

her seductive features.

Bill Senff climbed out of his sedan. He went up to the porch. The woman stepped toward him. She was trembling.

He said: "Are you Mrs. Labrody?"

"Y-yes. You're the detective from the police station?"

Senff nodded. "Got your call a while ago. What's the dope?"

She drew him back under the shelter of the porch. She lowered her tremulous voice. "It—it's my husband. George Labrody. He's the one who's been threatened."

BILL SENFF knew George Labrody. Not personally, but by unsavory reputation. Labrody was a big-time gambler; ran a string of handbooks, owned a chain of night-spots and gaming joints.

His wife had been a chorus-girl. Around thirty, now—but still plenty attractive. You could tell that Merle Labrody spent plenty of time under the ministration of beauticians and masseurs. Not a line, not a wrinkle on her face. No hint of excess weight on her sleek body. Never a trace of sag to her firm breasts, revealed through the thin, rain-soaked negligee she was wearing.

But Senff wasn't interested in enticing feminine conformations just then. "You say your husband received a threatening letter a while ago?"

"Y-yes. About an hour ago. That's why I phoned headquarters. The letter threatened my husband with death. Threatened to kill him at exactly twelve o'clock tonight."

Senff glanced at his wrist-watch. Ten o'clock now. Then: "Any idea who wrote the letter?"

"No. No proof. But—but there's one man who m-might have made the threat—"

"Who?"

"Steve Larkin. He used to be George's best friend. They were partners. George found that Steve was stealing money. Sent Larkin to jail. Larkin threatened George in the court-room. Said he'd get out and kill George some day. If it weren't for the fact that Larkin is still in prison, I might suspect him—"

Bill Senff scowled. "Maybe you haven't been reading the newspapers recently. Steve Larkin broke out of stir day before yesterday. Didn't you know that?"

The red-haired woman swayed. "Oh, God! Then he must be the one!"

The headquarters man grunted. "What does your husband say about the death-note?"

"He just laughed when he read it. Laughed, and started to get drunk. He doesn't know I phoned for police protection. He'll be furious when he learns that I've brought a detective here. B-but I'm f-frightened. . . ."

"Sure. I understand. I'll handle your husband with kid gloves. I'll try and keep him from getting sore and throwing me out on my ear. Let's go inside."

MERLE LABRODY came close to the detective. "And—and you'll stick close to my husband? You won't let anything . . . happen to him?"

"Do my best," Senff smiled.

Unexpectedly she pressed herself close to him, so that he could feel the firmness of her breasts upon his chest; so that he could smell the faint fragrance of her auburn hair. "I—I trust you!" she whispered. "I know you'll guard George!"

For an instant, Bill Senff almost forgot himself. Almost slipped an arm

about her waist. Almost kissed the red, moist lips so tantalizingly close to him. There was a femal magnetism about the sensuous contact of her body pressed to his that made his veins throb. But he caught himself in time; remembered that he had a job to do. "Let's go on inside," he said.

Merle Labrody led him into the house. She opened a door leading into a combined living-room and den.

There were two people inside the comfortable, leather-trimmed room. One was a man, Labrody, the gambler. A slim, waspish, sallow man with thinning hair and a perpetual sneer about the corners of his mustached mouth. His eyes were whiskey-bleared now; his face alcoholically flushed.

With him was a girl. The girl and Labrody must have been very close together when the room's door opened. Now the girl sprang backward, smoothing her white silk blouse.

Senff caught the whole scene at a glance. The girl was a little slow in gaining composure. The headquarters man got an eyeful of her agitation, reflected in the heaving of her deliciously rounded breasts. And when he looked at Labrody, he saw that the gambler's mouth was smeared with lipstick. The girl in the white blouse had smeared lips, too.

She was a cute little trick. Blonde, slender, elfin. Narrow hips, tiny breasts, piquant face—a face now stained with a crimson blush. Below the hem of her pert skirt, Senff noted tapering legs and trim ankles. A very cute trick indeed.

But if Senff realized what they had interrupted, the gambler's wife didn't. At least she didn't seem to see anything wrong. Merle Labrody, trembling with

apprehension for her husband's safety, hadn't seemed to tumble to the situation.

Nobody spoke for an awkward moment. Then the gambler's wife performed halting introductions. To the embarrassed-looking blonde girl she said: "Marge, th-this is Sergeant Senff from police headquarters. Mr. Senff, this is Marge Larkin." Then she looked at her whiskey-bleared husband. "George, I—I disobeyed your orders. I phoned the police station and had them send Sergeant Senff to g-guard you tonight. . . ."

THE gambler's lips became a thin line. "Damn it!" he mumbled thickly. "Told you not to do that! Don't want any truck with coppers. Don't like the breed!"

"But—but George—that note—"

"Hell with the note! I can take care of myself." Then Labrody picked up a full glass of whiskey, downed it. He settled himself in a big, deeply-upholstered leather easy chair; seemed to lose some of his malice. He grinned saturninely at Senff. "Well, as long as you're already here, shamus, you might as well stay."

"Thanks." The headquarters man felt distaste for the gambler. An unlovely guy, Labrody. Bill found himself wondering why a dame like Merle Labrody would stick to such a rat. Why, hell—she was a knockout. She could have her pick of the men. And yet she seemed absolutely nuts about her husband.

There was another thing Senff didn't understand. The blonde cutie—Marge Larkin, they called her—didn't look like the easy-going sort. Didn't look like the kind who'd voluntarily allow a guy like Labrody to paw her.

Nothing added up right in Senff's

mind. It was a damned peculiar set-up. Why hadn't the auburn-haired Merle Labrody noticed anything funny between her husband and the blonde?

WELL, family difficulties and domestic problems weren't in Senff's line. He was here for just one purpose—As a starter, he turned to Mrs. Labrody. "Maybe you'd better take me through the house and show me around. I want to check up; make sure nobody's hiding in any of the rooms."

"Y-yes, sergeant." Merle Labrody looked toward the blonde girl. "Y-you'll stay here with George while we're gone?"

"Of course, Merle. And please don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

George Labrody laughed drunkenly. "Naw. Nothing's gonna happen."

Detective-sergeant Senff followed Mrs. Labrody from the room. She took him to the cellar first. He sprayed the dark basement with beams from his flashlight. Saw nobody. Nothing suspicious. Then upstairs; a search of all the rooms on the first floor. Again, nothing out of the ordinary.

"What about servants?" Senff asked quietly.

"I dismissed them all for the night, after we received the letter."

"Okay. Nobody else in the house except you, your husband, and the blonde girl?"

"That's right, sergeant."

"Which reminds me," Senff said. "You introduced her as Marge Larkin. Seems like I remember you telling me, before that, about a guy your husband sent to jail. Steve Larkin. Is there any connection between the two?"

"Y-yes. Marge is Steve's sister. When Steve went to jail, she had no place to

live. My husband insisted that she come here to stay with us."

"I get it," Senff said softly. But a new puzzle was added to the jig-saw pieces in his mind. This was a damned screwy household, and no mistake. George Labrody sends his partner, Steve Larkin, to jail for theft. Then gives Larkin's sister a home. No sense to that!

The detective followed Mrs. Labrody upstairs to the second floor. Ascending behind her, he couldn't help noticing the lithe sweep of her thighs, the undulant sway of her hips ahead of him. In going up, she'd drawn her negligee almost to her knees. Her chiffon-sheathed legs were plenty nifty. Show-girl legs. Earl Carroll stuff. Damned nice!

TOGETHER they went through all the rooms of the upper flat. First a store-room packed with disused furniture. Senff noticed a leather-upholstered chair similar to the one Labrody was sitting in, downstairs. A pile of miscellaneous other outmoded stuff grouped about the chair. But no trace of any possible lurking prowler.

After the store-room, they entered two other bedrooms. Nobody hiding under beds or in closets. All windows locked.

A final bedroom. "Marge Larkin's room," Merle Labrody explained.

Senff peered around. Saw nothing suspicious. But he did notice that the window of his particular room was open. He went toward it. Abruptly, his hand darted toward his holstered service .38; yanked the weapon out. His eyes were narrowed.

Merle Labrody whispered: "Wh-what—?"

"Thought I heard somebody outside!"

Senff clipped out. He leaped for the window, flung it wide. Stared out into the rainy night.

He heard a faint scuttling sound on the roof of the porch just outside the window. Grimly he lanced the beam of his flashlight out upon the darkness. Nobody in evidence on the porch roof. But there was a dry spot just under the open window. A spot such as might have been caused by someone crouching



He lifted Marge Larkin, carried her across the room. Then there was a thud of feet from the window, the sound of crashing glass—

there since the rain commenced a short time before.

The headquarters man turned. Slammed down the window. Locked it. "Got to take a gander around the grounds outside. Think somebody's prowling around!" he announced.

Merle Labrody clung to him. She was shivering. "I'm scared! I'm scared

for George—!" she whimpered.

Somehow her kimono had gaped open in front. Senff caught a hint of firm, rounded hillocks. And when the woman pressed herself against him, they flattened in the most intriguing, provocative manner . . .

For a minute he lost control of himself and of the situation. After all, he was

a man; he was human. You couldn't blame him for slipping an arm about her waist, squeezing her . . .

She didn't seem to mind. Didn't put up much objection when his fingers traced lightly over her uncovered shoulders. She just closed her eyes . . .

THEN, all of a sudden, there came a sound from downstairs. A woman's shrill scream.

Senff stiffened; leaped away from the woman. "What the devil!" he grated. Then he launched himself out of the room, and went pelting down the staircase.

He reached the living-room door. From within, that shrill feminine cry was repeated. Marge Larkin's scream. . .

Senff yanked the door open, went hurtling into the room with drawn revolver. His eyes widened.

Marge was struggling in the drunken arms of Labrody. The whiskey-bleared gambler was holding her despite her squirming effort to escape, ripping at the front of her blouse. Tearing it away from the cringing softness of her breasts. Cursing her. "You damned slut—stick me with a knife, will you—"

Even as he spoke, he swayed on his feet. Blood flecked his lips. He staggered; released the girl. She cowered away from him, forgetful of the intimate display of her tender flesh. Her eyes were wide with horror. She opened her mouth to scream once more.

The sound aborted at her lips. George Labrody had spilled his length on the floor. He coughed once. Rolled over. Stiffened convulsively, and went limp.

His eyes were glazing. Blood drooled from his flaccid mouth. The headquarters detective grabbed for the gambler's wrist; felt for pulse-beat. There wasn't any.

With an oath in his throat, Senff rolled the man over on his face. Out of Labrody's back protruded the haft of a thin, keen-bladed stiletto. The blade was buried hilt-deep below the shoulder-blade. Square through the subscapular tissue.

BILL SENFF had put in six months study with the police medical department. He knew enough of surgery to realize that the long, thin dagger had probably sliced through the pleural cavity, entered the pericardial sac. Probably had penetrated the posterior wall of the left ventricle. Internal hemorrhage had filled up the pericardial sac, stopped the gambler's heart.

As the detective straightened up, Merle Labrody came hurtling into the room. She saw her husband lying there on the floor. "George—oh, my God!" she cried. She went to her knees alongside the slain man. Her eyes were blazing with a maniacal light.

"I heard his dying words!" she shrieked. "I heard him say that Marge Larkin stuck him with a knife! She killed him—!"

The Larkin girl was ghost-white. "No—no!" she wailed. "I didn't! I never touched him! He jumped out of his chair, leaped at me. Yelled something at me. Caught me. Tore my blouse. Then Sergeant Senff came rushing in—and George fell to the floor. . . ."

Senff grunted. It sounded pretty far-fetched. Yet somehow he wanted to believe the yellow-haired girl. He hadn't seen her actually stabbing the man. Yet there'd been nobody else in the room except Marge and Labrody.

No closets in the room, either. No place where anyone else might be hiding. And the windows all closed, locked!

Reluctantly, Senff went to the girl. "Sorry, sister. Looks as if I'll have to hold you."

She shrank from him. He covered her with his service .38. "Don't try to get away," he advised quietly. Then he reached for the telephone in one corner of the room.

No answering sound! A dead line!

He slammed the phone back into its cradle. "Line's been cut!" he rasped grimly. He turned to the gambler's widow. "Put on a coat and run out to the nearest phone. Call headquarters. Tell 'em to send a wagon and the medical examiner. Make it snappy."

Merle Labrody nodded. Senff heard the front door slam.

"YOU—you d-don't think I k-killed him?" Marge Larkin quavered.

"What else can I think?" Senff herded the girl upstairs to her own room.

He stood in her bedroom with her. "Hurry up. Change that torn blouse. Put on a hat and coat."

She fumbled at the ripped shirtwaist. Blushed as his eyes drank in the temptingly revealed glories of her creamy breasts. She tried to cover herself with her inadequate hands.

Then, abruptly, she faced him. Dropped her palms from her breasts. "You—you've got to let me get away!" she whispered desperately. "I—I didn't kill Labrody. But they'll p-pin it on me. I know they will. That knife—"

"What about the knife?"

"It—it b-belongss to m-me! It was a souvenir. My b-brother gave it to me a long time ago . . . And Steve was innocent of stealing anything from Labrody! He was railroaded. Framed! Just as I'm being framed."

"Yeah? And I suppose that only now Steve's innocence makes any difference

to you!" Senff said heavily. "In spite of the fact that Labrody framed your brother, you came here to live. You allowed Labrody to make love to you—while his wife was right in the same house with you!"

The girl flushed miserably. "I—I—yes! I allowed Labrody to make love to me!"

"You were in love with Labrody, huh? And tonight you killed him out of jealousy or something, is that it?"

"No! No!" she panted. "I hated Labrody! And I accepted his offer of a home—I came here to live—so that I could be near him. So that some day I could get evidence against him. Prove that he'd framed my brother!"

"And you let Labrody go as far as he wanted with you, let him make plenty of love to you, even though you didn't like his advances, just to gain his confidence?"

"Yes! That's it!" the girl whispered. She came close to the detective. "Now you know why I've got to get away! All those things will come out if I'm put on trial. It will be learned that I hated Labrody, wanted to avenge my brother. The prosecution will say that I murdered Labrody for r-revenge!" Her eyes were pleading, desperate.

Senff shook his head slowly. "Sorry. It's my duty to take you in. Nothing else I can do."

"No! You c-can't arrest me! You mustn't! I'll d-do anything you ask . . . if you'll let me escape . . .!" She was up close to Bill Senff now. Pressing her almost nude breasts against him. Offering herself, shamelessly, desperately.

Her hands went upward to her bosoms, touched their intimate curves caressingly, invitingly. She took his hands, drew his arms around her.

DETECTIVE - SERGEANT Bill Senff lost his head for a minute. His self-control slipped its moorings. The closeness, the sweet elfin daintiness of the girl was enough to send any man off his trolley. He forgot everything except the surge of sensation that whipped through his veins like a hot tropical storm . . .

He grabbed Marge Larkin, lifted her, carried her across the room . . .

Then something happened. Something unexpected, startling. There came a crash of splintered glass. The thud of feet landing on the floor of the room from the shattered window.

Senff tried to launch himself upright. He heard the girl cry out: "Steve—Steve!"

Then something bashed down on Senff's skull. He pitched forward on his face; buried his nose in a pillow. As if from a vast distance he heard a man's voice rasping: "Sis! Marge! We've got to get out of here! I've been hiding on the porch roof under your window all evening. Come on—"

"Steve!" came the girl's wailing cry. "Was it you who . . . killed Labrody . . . ?"

That was all. That's all Bill Senff heard. A black, billowing blanket of unconsciousness settled down over his senses; blotted out everything.

A FEELING of motion, a swaying sensation under him, awakened Bill Senff. He opened his eyes. Stared.

He was in an ambulance. On a stretcher. A white-coated Emergency Hospital interne was leaning over him, bandaging his skull.

He tried to sit up.

The interne restrained him. "Take it easy, sarge. You got a nasty crack on

the noggin. And your prisoner took it on the lam. Mrs. Labrody found you after she got back from calling headquarters. So she went out again; put in another hurry call. We came in the ambulance and picked you up. There's a dragnet out for Marge Larkin—and for her brother!

Senff swung his long legs over the side of the stretcher. "Stop this machine, damnit! I've got work to do! I think I can pick up that damned killer, clear the whole case tonight! Let me out!"

The interne tried to reason with him. "You can't do that, Senff. You've been hurt. You've got to go to the hospital—"

"To hell with the hospital!" the headquarters dick ground out. "I've got a thick skull. Now stop this damned wagon before I begin taking it apart!"

The interne rapped on the glass by the driver's compartment. The ambulance slowed down; halted. Bill Senff leaped out into the night. He felt for his gun; found that he still had it. "Be seeing you guys!" he clipped out. And he turned, started slogging back through the rain.

HE WAS headed for the home of the murdered gambler. He knew that the murderer would return there. Knew that it was just a question of getting a certain bit of necessary evidence, then putting the collar on the killer . . .

As he dog-trotted through the rain, he pieced a lot of things together.

Larkin had been out of stir just two days. Plenty of time for a murder-plan to be laid and carried out. Plenty of time for that threatening letter to be written and delivered to Labrody. Plenty of time to set the stage for killing the gambler.

And Marge Larkin fitted into the thing, too. All the way around. Her presence in Labrody's house. Her acceptance of Labrody's love-making. A perfect set-up!

"*You're the detective from the police station?*" she asked.



Senff's lips tightened; his jaw jutted. His fist closed over the butt of the gun in his pocket. Make a sucker of him, would they? Kill Labrody under his very nose, huh? By God, the killer wouldn't get away with it!

Through narrowed eyes, Bill Senff saw the Labrody house looming before

him in the rain. He crept toward it, keeping in the shadows. Moving silently, like a stalking Indian.

No light either downstairs or up. No life. Evidently the headquarters detail had removed the gambler's body, got all the dope they could get, then departed.

That was what Senff had hoped for. He wanted darkness, silence.

He went around to the rear of the house. Found the back door. Three

minutes of working on the old-fashioned look, and he had the door open. He was inside.

He heard a sound toward the front of the place. The living-room where Labrody had been bumped off!

Snick! Bill Senff snapped on his flashlight. The light in his left fist, his gun in the right, he went slamming down the hallway to that leather-trimmed living-room.

Somebody froze. A girl. A girl who was tugging at a heavy leather-upholstered easy-chair. In the white beam of Senff's flashlight she whirled—

"Okay, Merle Labrody!" Senff barked. "Stick out your wrists. You're under arrest."

He clicked the bracelets on her. She was death-pale as he snapped on the room's lights. "You—damn you, copper!" she shrieked. "You can't prove—"

SENFF gestured toward the leather-upholstered chair she had been dragging from the room. Alongside it was another chair. An identical one. It was this second chair that he remembered having seen upstairs in that store-room, earlier tonight.

"Never mind the denials, Mrs. Labrody!" he said quietly. "You needn't even try to explain why you brought this second easy-chair downstairs just now, to substitute it for the chair your husband was sitting in when he was murdered. You needn't explain, because I'll tell you."

She stared at him in helpless fury as he went toward that first chair—the one her husband had sat in, tonight.

The detective reached into his pocket, pulled out a penknife, opened the biggest blade. Then he slashed at the leather-upholstered back of the chair. Pulled

away the leather—and disclosed a mechanism contrivance actuated by a spring and a small clock.

"Simple—and damned clever!" Bill Senff grunted. "There were two of these chairs. One in disuse, upstairs in the store-room. The other one down here. Your husband's favorite chair.

"You fixed up this spring device. At a certain hour, the spring was tripped by the clock. An upholstered panel of the chair popped open; a dagger was sent plunging into your husband's back. Marge Larkin's dagger, which you'd stolen from among her effects.

You were crazy jealous because Marge was allowing your husband to make love to her. So you planned to kill him and pin the crime on the girl. The idea probably came to you when you read how Marge's brother had escaped from prison. You figured that the crime would either be laid to Marge herself, or on her brother. Either way, you were in the clear—and you'd have your revenge.

You wrote the threatening letter yourself. You phoned headquarters and had me come out here to guard your husband. That was to establish an alibi for yourself. The letter said your husband would be murdered at midnight; but you had the clock mechanism set for a good deal earlier.

You went with me to help me search the house for any possible intruders. That left Marge Larkin alone with your husband. You allowed your negligee to fall open, upstairs, so that you could lure me into staying up there with you until the clockwork killing was accomplished.

Well, down here in this room, the mechanism worked. The knife plunged out of the chair, into your husband's back. But it struck him in such a way

that he lived two or three minutes after he was stabbed. He lived long enough to leap from his chair, grab Marge and accuse her of knifing him. That's when I busted into the room, just as he fell dead. And you were upstairs until that moment. Your alibi was complete.

"Then, just now, you were exchanging chairs. Taking the death-chair upstairs to that store-room, where you'd leave it until you had time to rip out the murder-mechanism. Leaving the duplicate, substitute chair down here where nothing could be suspected about it."

"Damn you to hell—!" Merle Labrody panted. "You must be a mind-reader!"

"Yeah. I can see into the future. I can see you sitting in another kind of death-chair!" Senff said slowly.

The auburn-haired woman leaped at him. Her move was unexpected, sudden. With her manacled hands she snatched the open pocket-knife from Bill Senff's hand. Reversed it. Sent it plunging into her breast. "No . . . electric chair . . .

for me . . . !" she gasped thickly. She slumped.

WITH an oath, Bill Senff leaped toward her. But he was too late. The knife-blade was buried in her heart.

Slowly he lowered the lovely corpse to the floor. Then he turned, went out of the room; out of the house, in search of a phone to call headquarters.

Moving through the rain, he thought of the golden-haired Marge Larkin, who had escaped with her brother. The Larkins were probably well on their way to safety now. And when Senff got through telling what he knew, the cops wouldn't bother trying to nab either of them from now on.

Senff thought of that brief interlude of bliss he'd had with Marge in her room, just before her brother crashed through the window. A sweet kid, Marge. Damned sweet.

Senff went forward through the rain, wondering if he'd ever meet her again some day . . .

KILLER'S PRICE

Mike Cockerell was on vacation! Or so he thought!

And then at one o'clock in the morning his telephone rang with a wild story about a kidnaped millionaire's daughter and a twenty grand reward.

Like a sucker, Mike kept the rendezvous—only to find that he had stepped into the screwiest mess of double-crosses and frame-ups, and killings and more killings, of his whole career.

Next month Mort Lansing spins a detective yarn that you'll be a long time forgetting.

Don't miss "Killer's Price"!

PAY OFF,

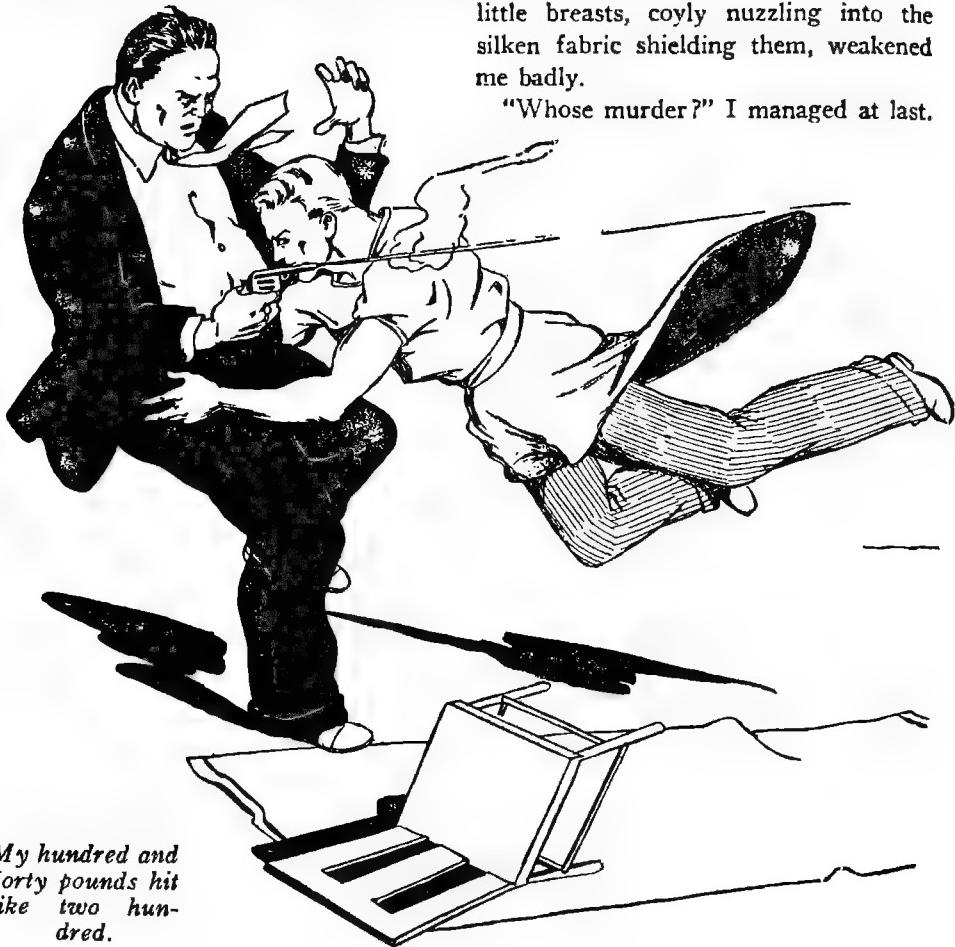
She hired him to stop a murder. She hadn't money enough for his fee, but she promised him he wouldn't be sorry. And it all hinged on a "good thing" a race-track gambler had!

SHORTY," Doris Mercer said jumpily, "I want you to stop a murder!"

I sideslipped mentally, then leveled out as I looked sharply at her. What I saw

was . . . Hair that might have been spun copper. Limpid eyes. A mouth of red velvet. It was warm in my apartment and she was holding her Persian lamb coat open. The curves of her sturdy, little breasts, coyly nuzzling into the silken fabric shielding them, weakened me badly.

"Whose murder?" I managed at last.



My hundred and forty pounds hit like two hundred.

OR ELSE - !

By W. W. McKENNA



Tensely she said: "Arch Holman and Fred Tasker put over a good thing at Pimlico the other day. One of Fred's horses. Some Chicago bookmaker held

the bag. After the payoff, the bookie found out the race was a phoney. He wants his dough back . . . or else!"

It didn't surprise me. Arch Holman,

in addition to being Doris Mercer's guardian, was a big noise in the town's bookmaking racket. Fred Tasker owned and raced a small string of gee-gees. But—what the man in the street didn't know was that this pair were engineers of many a fixed race. Because I'm around the tracks a lot, I knew these things. I really am supposed to be a private dick, but—how I like watching the ponies gallop!

"You know who this bad boy is?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Arch just said they'd been threatened, that's all."

Of a sudden, I got a little sore. For a long time, I'd been all the way for Doris. She knew it, too. But not a tumble had she given me—never. Yet . . . here she was asking me to be a target for some red hot. Nuts!

Trying to sound tough, I said: "It'll cost you a grand, baby. One G."

"Oh-h-h-h-l!" she wailed, catching her face between her hands and rocking a little on stilted heels. "I can't pay you that much. Arch says the money dad left me's almost all gone. Shorty—"

"Sorry," I said tightly. "No can do for less. One grand. Else, no biz."

MAGIC occurred before my eyes then. To me, that is. From a distracted, harassed girl, Doris abruptly was a smiling creature of love. She moved very close to me; looked searchingly, imploringly up into my eyes. I began to heave a little. The heady perfume she was wearing drugged me. Her nearness was poison. Nobody ever will know how I wanted to reach out and crush her to me . . . to feel the soft, downy miracles of her little breasts against me . . . to revel in the touch of her slim figure, melting close, help myself to the mad delight of that crimson, velvet mouth. . . .

"Please, Shorty," she breathed gently, tip of her tongue between her lips—inviting. "For me . . . please. You won't be sorry."

She was in my arms. My dry mouth was against her wet one. Those tiny breasts were fiery dots of delight, beating madly against my chest. I slid a trembling hand down the sweep of her back. Her mouth ravished mine briefly, retreating. I put one palm to the back of her head, held her . . . I'm afraid I was more savage than tender. But—was I altogether to blame?

Then she was away from me and both of us were quaking, breathless.

"You'll help me?" she murmured, unevenly. "You won't be sorry. I promise you won't. . . ."

I muttered, still groggy: "Yeah . . . yeah. Okay."

After she'd left, I cooled down. Things began worrying me. Why her sudden change in pace? Never before had I been able to get my hands on her, much less kiss her. Memory of it brought shivers. . . . Then, again I wondered.

I REACHED Pimlico about two that afternoon.

The horses were just coming out for the second when I walked out on the concrete apron in front of the stands. A fair enough crowd for the middle of the week. Banks of grey, late fall clouds frowning above. Damp, cold. Out in the infield, the totalisator was winking its ever changing odds.

I found Arch Holman in his box, where he was daily when the ponies were in town. A man was with him, standing, with glasses leveled on the horses. Chalk Mertz, another bookie, but small change stacked beside Holman. Holman had his nose in a racing form.

Stepping inside, I said: "How you doing, Arch?"

He looked around; grinned meatily; indicated a vacant chair. I sat down, lighting a cigarette. Mertz, lowering his glasses, saw me; took a chair.

"Hi, Faulkner. Hope you got *Plum Duff*. He's a good thing."

"What's on your mind, Shorty?" Arch Holman asked, back in his form sheet again.

Before I had a chance to tell him, the field broke from the stalls at the top of the stretch. Roar boiled up from the crowd. Mertz, bounding up with the "They're Off!" cry, got his glasses into play again.

Plum Duff got up in time to cop the race by a snoot . . .

I said to Holman: "Saw Doris this morning. She says one of the boys out Chicago way is mad because you dished up one that was too fast to see—right?"

Arch Holman swung his stare to me. He was a solid chunk of well barbered flesh. Estuaries of shrewd wrinkles forked from the corners of merry little eyes.

"She's talking in her sleep, Shorty." His laugh plumbed the depths of his thick throat. "I'm in on a boat race and I give Chicago ten grand. I get back seventy. He's beefing out there. Why? Because"—full lips thinned—"somebody blew that it *was* a boat race."

Stumping my cigarette, I said: "Doris is in a sweat about you and Tasker. She wants I should keep you two from getting all done up in lead."

"She's a nice doll," Holman was soft, serious. "She sweats because she thinks this Chicago heel means it. Hell! He ain't gonna do a damn' thing. He's in business to pay off on winners. Just like me. Skip the whole thing!"

I got up, yawning and stretching. "Okay, Arch. Pick you up, sometime . . ."

What the hell? He *should* know what's what in his own racket.

TWENTY minutes after the last race saw me at my apartment. A phone call to Doris brought no answer. But, wanting to talk to her, I decided to go on over there, rather than hang around here.

I was in the hall, closing the door, when the phone rang.

"Shorty!" a rattled voice exploded . . . and I recognized Arch Holman. "Tasker just got knocked off . . . !"

My brain nose dived. "Where the hell are you?" I yelled.

"At his apartment!" he half sobbed. Crazy, unreasoning fear there, I heard.

"Right over!" I snapped, hanging up.

TWO slugs in the face had killed Tasker.

He was a sticky, gut-wrenching sight . . . sprawled across a sofa, head over the edge, a lake of blood on the floor. One fast look was enough, believe me.

Holman whispered haggardly: "He ain't at the track today, so I stop by to see him on the way uptown. He's this way. God . . . !" He shuddered fatly.

He looked like dirty bread dough and I felt sorry for him. It's no fun wondering when an unknown bullet is going to slap you down.

"Listen, Arch!" I snapped. "That Chi boy isn't kidding. You got to stick close to base from now on." I jerked a thumb. "Call the cops."

He left the room, features spasmodic. More from habit than anything, I fanned Tasker's corpse. The usual articles. Flipping open his wallet, I froze.

A snapshot of Doris Mercer looked

up at me. And, in a child-like hand, she'd inscribed across it: "To my dearest Fred."

I replaced the wallet, minus the picture. My head was whizzing with a hell of a lot of thoughts, none of them coherent. Then Holman was returning, dabbing at his stricken face with a handkerchief.

"They're coming," he mumbled. Then, in a burst: "Let's get outta here!"

The cops arrived in twenty minutes. . . . In another thirty, they were gone with Tasker. Their net was out for a certain party—or parties—from Chicago.

Playing safe, I drove Holman home, went upstairs with him to his rooms.

"There's something dizzy about this, Arch," I told him. "I got ideas who might be mixed up with it. You watch your step and I'll get in touch with you when I know if I'm right."

"Who—who you think?" he asked, floundering in agitation, helpless.

I wouldn't tell him. Just: "I'll call you," on my way out.

I was wondering what Doris would have to say—now.

I dropped by the apartment hotel where Doris Mercer lived, but she wasn't in.

It was nine, or thereabouts, when I reached home. Believe me, I was dizzy. What kind of a game was she playing? To me, she was aces—which meant she wasn't capable of crossing people up. Yet—how come Tasker had a snap of her? Further, who else could have tipped this Chi crowd off? Certainly not Arch Holman. Nor Tasker.

Letting myself in, I switched on a floor light.

"Hello, Shorty!" Myrtle Lang called cheerily.

I couldn't do a thing for a moment after stepping inside and closing the door.

Myrtle was a hot number who got around a lot, mostly in the company of Chalk Mertz. I'd never made a play for her, though wanting to. Yet . . . here she was, big as hell, coiled on my studio couch like some erotic snake. That wasn't the half of it, either.

She was damn' near naked!

Her clothes were neatly hanging over a nearby chair. That is, all—it seemed—but a filmy princess slip. She was wearing that. I took in lazy, passion-filled eyes; a smear of a mouth—felt tingles chasing all over me as I inspected her lush body.

"I've been wanting to have a date with you for a long time," she cooed.

With that, she stood up and deliberately shrugged away the thin straps of her slip! And as it slid slowly down, I saw she was wearing a dainty mesh brassiere and gauzy step-ins.

"Holy smoke!" I breathed, out loud.

Good reason, too. Her breasts, trembling with each movement of her creamy torso . . . They were living monuments to some master sculptor. Yet soft, enticing, desirable, as no sculptor could fashion from marble. Their curves dipped gently in a forward thrust. Between them, the faintest shadow. Below, the milky lea of her stomach poured down to her hips.

Again, I mutter, almost choking: "Holy smoke!"

She smiled sensuously, eyes heavy lidded. Bringing up her hands, she trailed them with loving provocativeness down her sides.

"What's wrong, Shorty," she breathed. "Muscle bound?"

I THREW my hat and overcoat aside on my way to her. She disintegrated into my grasp, a writhing column of white heat. Tentacles raked my throat

and lungs. I could hardly see for pounding blood in my brain. But I could feel! Warm, pulsing, her body was. Within my eager arms, she cringed in delight. Her mouth, plastered like flaming mercury to mine, withdrew at last. She gasped, dry, tortured; clinging fiercely,



straining close . . . too close, with every muscle.

And then, ice-like, she was looking at me. Smiling, mockingly, too.

Softly she asked: "Who are you going to stick for Tasker's murder?"

Wow. . . ! Here I'd got the works from this wild, sultry-eyed gal—up to a certain point. I was dizzy. And she breaks a question like *that* over my head! Her body was still molded to mine, undulating sinuously. Why . . . ?

No wonder.

Chalk Mertz! He'd been in Holman's box, had heard all I'd said to Arch. Myrtle was his plant. . . . What for? Chills were beginning to scamper up and down my back. I wanted to have a chat with Mertz in a hurry, now. Right away, I grabbed Myrtle's naked, rounded shoulders.

"Somebody's at the door!" I whispered urgently. "Bathroom—fire escape!"

She turned, whitening; padded across the room, flesh quivering, breasts stormily trembling. I hated to leave, but I *had* to get the hell out and see Mertz.

Of course, nobody had been at the door.

The fire escape ran past the living room window, too. Bundling up her clothes, I raised the sash and dumped them out on the rungs. Then I whistled to Myrtle, crouching outside the bathroom window. She must have been damn' near stiff in her birthday ensemble.

"Your clothes, honey!" I called. "Dress out there!"

Banging and locking the window, I jumped to the bathroom—just in time to prevent her from raising the sash. I locked that too. Grinned at her and thumbed my nose.

You should have seen her face! And heard the names she called me!

You couldn't blame her. Nor me, either. Or could you?

IT was along about eleven, same night. Chalk Mertz's place, like his occupation, wasn't big time. He operated his book above a set of lap-eared bowling alleys. No run down sheets, no race descriptions. Just a guy trying to get along. Yeah. . . . ?

The crash of maple pins worried my ears as I made my way upstairs. Rapping on what Chalk used as an office, I went in without waiting to be asked.

"Nice evening," I said, thin as eggshell.

Chalk Mertz was up to his eyes in white slips: the day's play. Hat off his forehead, he was a sad faced sea gull you wouldn't want to trust.

"Oh. . . . Faulkner!" he said, sitting back like big business. "Well. . . . ?"

I got right down to matters at hand.

"What do you know about Fred Tasker getting knocked off?" I threw at him.

His stringy eyebrows arched, then grew together. Vertical gashes over them.

"What the—hell you talking about, Faulkner? I got things to do and you bust in talking like you fell out a window on your head."

I sneered. "Nice act, Chalk. We'll let it slide. But—get this!" I glared at him, pointing. "Sending a blank brained doll on my trail won't bring you any potatoes home—see? Furthermore, if Arch Holman should happen to wake up dead some morning — like Tasker — they'll hang out your number."

He came to his feet, hot eyes, mouth apart to talk. I shut him up.

"Never mind the beef! . . . You got

plenty reasons, keed. I know Arch and Tasker clipped you more'n once on the ponies. You got ideas when you heard me tell Arch about that Chicago business this afternoon." My grin had no soul. "A tasty way to get all square. But . . . I'm telling you!"

He leaned across his desk, stiff armed. Amazement drifted gradually into anger; then murderous rage . . . as plain as a strip of movie film across his sea gull's face.

Finally, in a humming thin voice: "Beat it, Faulkner. Beat it before I take you apart. You hear? Beat it!" He was shaking all over. "You—"

He broke off and I saw his eyes, like chipped flint, spike to a point behind me. The cold breath of warning brushed me. Jumping aside and twisting around at the same time, I went after my rod.

I was about two lengths back of the barrier.

A mountain piled down over my head and shoulders. With rockets going off in my brain, I started on my way to the floor in a hurry. Things blackened up like a minstrel show. But I didn't slide all the way out.

Dreamily through a pain-shot skull, I felt myself being half lifted, half dragged. Under my limp heels, steps. . . . Grating voices; varied noises. Cold air smacking me in the face. . . .

I was sailing through the air. Then—*whoomp!* Cement sidewalk meeting me had made the contact noise. Yep—I'd been crocked over the head, hustled downstairs and heaved out on my ear.

I OPENED my eyes. Beside me was a dun colored column rising from a circle of light—a lamp post. It looked good to me. Grabbing hold, I hoisted myself to the vertical position. I had a

head like the aftermath of a three day bender! Two girls walking by gave me the bird.

A roving taxi scooped me in. For the time being I had a bellyful of Mertz and Company. Words with Doris Mercer was what I craved. Her snapshot in Tasker's wallet might mean anything. What that anything proved to be, easily could make or break this mess.

She wasn't home, though, and I griped like hell. Cab fare had been a buck ten. Plus another buck ten to get home. And no swindle sheet, this time.

By then, it wasn't much past midnight. A sleeper to the west would pull out at two-twelve. Holman had given me the name of the Chicago bookmaker and I considered grabbing that choo choo. Back in my head lay a sneaking hunch that Chalk Mertz might have too much in common with that gent. In fact, Mertz and the Chicago bookie *could* be the same.

I unlocked my door. . . . A light in the living room. Company, too. Strike me blind if it wasn't Myrtle Lang—again!

She wasn't naked, but she'd had the crust to undress and get inside of my dressing gown. Did that doll have nerve! What the hell was Mertz getting set to pull now?

"Get your clothes on and get the hell out of here!" I snapped, boiling fast.

Her sultry eyes got coy. "Shorty . . . don't be so mean!" she pleaded, pouting.

With that, she was on her way to me. My robe was lolling limply in front of her. That half revealed her heavy breasts and I was sunk. I shoved both arms around her and the burning feel of that bundle of throbbing undulant girl clawed thrills all over my body. She didn't pull away.

(Continued on page 118)

By JAMES
A. LAWSON

G-Man



WHERE the shoreline curved and the bluff dropped to the jagged rocks of the little cove below, Lance Sontag stopped. He laid his color case and pallet and maulstick on the short salt grass and sat down.

Below him, the tide was going out, and his nostrils were filled with odors of seaweed and kelp. From his position near the edge of the bluff, Sontag could see back up the beach. So far this morning, it was empty. He sighed with relief as he packed his pipe, his moody eyes on a destroyer, San Diego bound. A Navy plane zoomed high overhead.

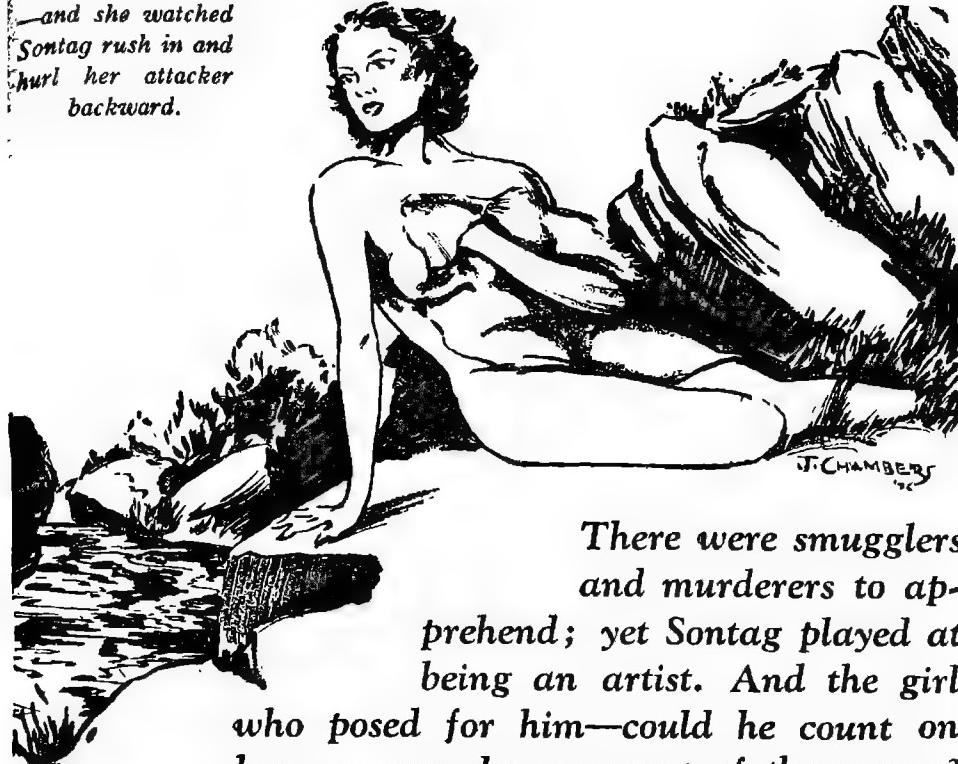
He was glad of this respite from playing artist. He wanted to forget that hellion, the greased-illusion, Kiroe Mock, the Government so badly wanted.

He shrunk, then, into himself, picked glasses from a pocket of his loose coat and focused them on a form that had appeared on the sandy shoreline far up the beach. His lips drew back in a grin of pure appreciation, showing strong white teeth clamped about his pipestem.

He flattened on his stomach, watching the girl come on. The tight little trunks she wore, were white, showing bronzed skin above and below. The little bandeau barely covered breasts that strained against their concealment. Between bandeau and trunks, an expanse of smooth, sun-browned stomach was visible.

He laid the glasses aside when she

*The girl was down
—
and she watched
Sontag rush in and
hurl her attacker
backward.*



*There were smugglers
and murderers to ap-
prehend; yet Sontag played at
being an artist. And the girl
who posed for him—could he count on
her, or was she an agent of the enemy?*

came almost below him and rounded a rocky point into a little cove. Lance Sontag eased himself to the edge of the bluff and thrust his head over cautiously.

THE girl's auburn hair ruffled in the breeze as she bent, laid a blanket on the sand between two sheltering rocks. She looked this way and that, seemed satisfied. Nimble fingers loosened the strings of the bandeau.

There was an ocean breeze, but it could not restrain the perspiration that came out on Sontag's face. His eyes devoured those twin mounds; bits of firm, impudent beauty as brown as the rest of her.

"God!" Sontag croaked.

The girl stood on her toes, arms high above her head. She was a statue, from

head to toes, of perfect, deliciously-contoured young womanhood. She loved this morning, the sun, her freedom. She stood on her hands, bent, rolled. And then, with a gay little laugh, she ran and dived into a little tidepool between the rocks.

She swam furiously around the pool, then turned and floated on her back. The slender brown length of her lay on the water, little ripples breaking past and over her stomach.

Lance Sontag swallowed and inhaled a mighty breath.

He turned over, chest heaving, and watched the cirrus clouds floating overhead. When he peeped again, the girl was drying herself with a rough towel. She lay on the blanket, spreading the towel over her.

"Lovable as hell!" Sontag assured himself fervently.

He stiffened, then. A man came clambering over the rocks from the other direction of the cove. Startled, the girl jumped up. The towel she clutched at eluded her. Eyes rolling, tongue running snakelike from between his lips, the man paused, essayed a winning smile, brushed a hand over the thin hair on his head, and came at her.

The girl backed away. Grinning, he followed. Holding her hands in front of her, she backed against the rocks at the bottom of the bluff—and could go no farther.

"Listen, toots, why be afraid of me?" Ingratiatingly.

"Don't. Go away," she begged.

"Listen, kid, when I find a hot number on the beach, I'm copping her."

SONTAG grabbed up his artist's paraphernalia and went hastily back down the sloping path. When he reached the sand, he dropped his burden and hurried around the rocky point into the cove. The girl was down, her slender legs pushing, throwing up the sand. The man was twisting one of her arms back, kneeling beside her.

Sontag ran in, grabbed him by his thinning hair, jerked his head back and swung one from the hip. The sodden sound of the blow, a grunt, and the other went onto his back. Sontag got him by an arm and leg, swung him easily, and sent him sailing into the tide-pool.

Spluttering, he came up, crawled out, choked a stream of profanity and disappeared around the point. Huddled in a sitting position, one arm shielding her breasts, one hand spread in her lap, the girl looked up at Sontag.

"Thanks," she gasped.

He dropped down beside her. "Glad to!" He meant it.

"I guess I really shouldn't—bathe and sun myself this way. But I love the sun."

"It's lovely," Sontag admired, his eyes devouring her.

She grew darker under her tan.

Neither knew how it happened. His arms were around her and he was pressing her back onto the sand. Her lips, moist and hot, were eager for his kisses. She moaned a faint, half-hearted "please" as his embrace grew in ardor.

"Darling!" Sontag exclaimed.

He was running a hand along the soft hollow of her back.

"No," she begged.

She wriggled away.

"That's—right," Sontag said hoarsely. He sat, pouring sand from one hand to the other, while she picked up her blanket and towel, and prepared to leave.

"I may be back here tomorrow. My name is Rhea," she said.

"Rhea, what?"

"Just Rhea—but don't expect me to give another—show."

"My name," he supplied, "is Sontag. Just Sontag. I'll be looking for you tomorrow. I'm an artist. I'd like another show."

"I might pose for you." She fled toward the point. Her voice, floating back, echoed, "I might."

"Hot damn!" Sontag cried. Playing the part of an artist—and he *could* paint a little—wasn't going to be so bad, after all.

BUT morning brought other things to Lance Sontag. His kit in hand, he hurried toward the bluff and the cove. As he neared, he could see the crowd of people on the beach; uniformed men,

county detectives, police of the little vacation town of Lacove, running back and forth.

Sontag worked in to the inner portion of the gabbling mob. His breath whistled between his teeth and his forehead wrinkled. A man lay high on the sand, where the incoming tide would get to him within a couple of hours. It was the man whom Sontag had socked the day before!

He looked around. Rhea—just Rhea—stood a few yards away. Sontag's gaze met hers, speculatively. She gazed back at him, and there was something odd, something pointedly uneasy in the way she acted.

Sontag looked away, past the body, to a Chris-Craft Cruiser that had been towed into the cove. He spotted a San Diego detective he knew, and caught his eye. He followed Sontag over the rocks, out of sight of the crowd.

"You still on the job, eh, Sontag?" he grunted. "Well, it looks like 'Uncle Whiskers' was right. Kiroe Mock ain't in this part of the world."

"I'm still working for the Government. Does that look like they think he isn't? Anyhow, that's beside the point. What have you got on that stiff down there?"

"He had cards on him. He's Malden Wyatt, jewelry buyer, lapidarist from Los Angeles. He was shot twice, through the back. That's his boat anchored in the cove. It was drifting past the kelp line, two miles out, when we picked it up.

"We found a wallet on him. A huge one. But it only had a few bucks in it."

"Have you inquired in all the houses around here?"

"Hell, you telling us how to run the

law? Of course we did. Even barged into that big place up there."

He jerked his head in the direction of a huge Spanish-style house that sat fifty yards back up the slope above the bluff. A high, adobe-and-plaster wall surrounded the place; tropical shrubs, vines, flowers grew everywhere.

"A writer lives there. Goofy duck with whiskers and glasses and an idea he's John B. Stetson—I mean Shaw."

"Wrong on both names," Sontag grunted. "I assume no one saw a thing?" he added.

"Guy was killed last night. Tide running. You know the noise it makes. Couldn't hear shots, and there wasn't a moon."

"When you get those bullets, give me one. Let me know of anything you learn," Sontag instructed. "Hell! Don't be like that. You know you'll get the credit if I help you crack the case."

Mollified, the detective nodded. "Though it looks," he said, "like it was murder for diamonds, or money."

"Or for revenge," Sontag reluctantly told himself, when the dick had gone.

HE SAT there for a long time, smoking, watching the pelicans that skimmed above the water, listening to the scream of gulls and the bark of sea lions. Finally, he arose and walked back to the cove. He jerked upright. Rhea was still there—though most of the others had gone with the removal of the lapidarist's body.

"It's rather terrible, isn't it?" Her deep, dark eyes probed him. As probing, he looked back. "Yes, rather bad—considering he was shot in the back."

He fell in step beside her as she swung off, with full, long strides, up the beach. For some reason, he could not

hook her up to the killing—at least not alone. He wondered, tightening inside, if she might not hold the key to what he wished to know: The whereabouts of that killer, smuggler, racketeer, Kiroe Mock. He couldn't shake the idea, far-fetched as it seemed.

She was studying him from under her long lids. "I—I've my car. See that little cottage, the other side of the street that runs along the beach to town? It's there. That's where I'm staying. I thought, if you'd like me to pose for you—"

She looked down at her feet.

She—did she suspect he suspected her? Could she know that he was a G-Man, a Government Agent? And it wasn't like her to offer, voluntarily to pose for him.

"I'd be glad to," he said.

They climbed into her little car. She drove through the town, turned on an old highway, and finally stopped the car at the top of a high cliff. She led the way down a treacherous path, and along a narrow bit of beach. The cliff was broken, filled with little caves along the base.

"Very few people come here," she told him, smiling. "How do you want me to pose?"

All thoughts of her guilt fled Sontag's mind. He dropped his easel frame, picked it up. "The complete figure, if you please," he huskily replied.

She hesitated, nodded, ducked into a cave. When she came out, Sontag had his canvas, his paints ready. Slender, she came toward him, every movement of her body a separate poem. Sontag arose, went toward her.

"Like this—" he placed one of her arms—"and this."

"You mustn't. You do something to me," she whispered.

Sontag groaned and stepped away.

For more than an hour, he worked. Worked furiously. And the start of the picture wasn't bad. While she dressed, he packed his things.

"Tomorrow?" he asked, helping her up the path.

She looked at him quickly, penetratingly. "Tomorrow."

In the two days that followed, Sontag tried to draw her out. Who she was, what her last name was, and what she was doing here. Her answers were evasive; as evasive as his own when she tried to question him.

SHE wasn't at her cottage the fourth day. In his own car, Sontag drove into San Diego and saw the detective he knew.

"The dead bozo, Malden Wyatt, was suspected of handling hot ice," was the information. "Went from L.A. to 'Diego, and to Ensenada in that boat of his. Here's one of the slugs. That's all we got, so far. Looks like all we *will* get, you ask me."

Sontag drove back, put his car away and walked down to the beach. He walked to the edge of the bluff and looked over. A pang of anger, of jealousy, assailed him. Rhea was sitting on the sand, very close to a man who wore an Iverness cape—even on such a hot day. He affected a Latin Quarter beret, a mustache, and wore dark glasses. By the description, Sontag gathered this must be the eccentric writer who lived in the big house up the slope.

Seized by sudden impulse, he went down the path.

Rhea, an expression on her face that told she had expected Sontag to show up, smiled in a satisfied manner. "I'm sorry I was not home this morning," was her explanation. "I didn't feel like—



Sontag had the uneasy feeling that mocking eyes were looking at him from behind those dark glasses.

"Oh, many things," Tarrant said, waving one hand. "My mood, perhaps. Perhaps," he paused, "the typewriter I use."

Rhea was tense, looking from one man

Mock laughed as he struck her; she hit the floor heavily, the little gun she had grabbed falling away from her.

working. Mr. Sontag, meet Rabon Tarrant. He's a celebrated writer, you know."

Sontag bowed. "You write under your own name?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Sometimes. That depends."

"Upon what?"

to the other. At last, she relaxed, seeming satisfied. Sontag stretched, yawned easily.

"If you'll come for dinner tonight," Rhea said, "I'll apologize at length."

"Fine," Sontag accepted.

He saw the quick, we've-got-secrets look that passed between the girl and

Rabon Tarrant. A warning feeling made weight in the stomach of Lance Sontag.

HE ENTERED the cottage he had rented, going slowly, deep in thought. "The stiff, Wyatt, knew her," he muttered. "Wyatt ran from Ensenada. Chinks could be run in from there, and ice picked up. Suppose Wyatt, though, came down here to Lacove, to get a bunch of smuggled rocks. He waits around. That tiff with the girl—he didn't know who she was, I suppose.

"Someone around here, then, sells him the diamonds: His wallet was empty, almost, when he was found. When he casts off his boat, he is shot in the back, the diamonds recovered—

"Hell! That's Kiroe Mock's exact way of doing things!"

He searched through a small file, got a picture of Kiroe Mock as last seen-to-be-known. That had been up north, along the Canadian line.

The G-Men wanted Mock; the Mounties wanted him. He'd killed Coastguardsmen, Custom Border Patrolmen, county and city police.

Kiroe Mock, the most elusive of them all, had no vulnerable spot, it seemed. He never worked with a big gang, but always with just two or three tried and trusted men.

Three or four of them, yet the amount of jewelry, the number of aliens they had smuggled in, the holdups they had perpetrated, ran far higher than the average gang-baron's take.

Sontag studied the picture before him. A lean, cynical face, high cheekbones, protruding underlip. A cruel face, and a crafty one. He got oil paints, a brush. Deftly, whistling softly, he went to work. He drew a Latin Quarter hat on the picture; darkened the sandy hair,

drew a black mustache and black glasses on it.

There was no excitement about him now. He knew who Rabon Tarrant was. And he was willing to bet Tarrant knew him. That Tarrant had set the girl on him to make sure.

Tarrant Kiroe Mock!

He filled and lighted his pipe, his hands very steady. Then he got in his car, went to the telephone office, called Los Angeles. Returning, he mixed himself a highball, read awhile, dozed off.

His life he knew, wasn't worth a cent if one slip were made tonight. As he shaved and dressed, a slow smile creased his lips. Funny, how cases were cracked, he reflected. Odd events, accidents, the other side being too eager—these things counted most.

He walked along the rise of the beach, where it ran up to the street, toward Rhea's place. The sun was halfway beyond the rolling Pacific's horizon, sending splashes of crimson and purple to tinge the breakers that ran and broke against the rocks.

Within him, Sontag could not help but wish to hell the girl were not mixed up in this.

The sight of her did not tend to lessen this desire. In a low-cut, thin dress, she greeted him at the door. His arms went around her and he lifted her off her feet, crushing her to him almost brutally. She returned his kisses, squirmed, breathed hotly in his ear. He sat her down.

"I can't stand too much," he warned. She laughed—and he thought it was a bit forced—gaily.

"I'm fixing the dinner myself," she said.

"Then, I'll help."

HE WENT with her to the tiny kitchen, while she finished preparing

the meal. And he watched every move she made. He helped her put the things on the little breakfast-nook table. She poured wine, and when she tasted hers first, then he tasted his. It was the same with everything.

Sontag was taking no chances on being poisoned or being doped.

As the evening wore on, her purpose in having him here became more and more obscure. They sat close together on the porch, watching the moon splash silver on the sea; listening to the breakers roar. A mocking bird, up late, filled the night with song.

"I've a thirst," she said, breaking a long silence, "for beer. If you'll get your car and drive to the town and get some, I'll make sandwiches while you're gone."

This was it! Almost too readily, Sontag agreed to go.

As he swung off in the direction of his own cottage, he was well aware of two dark forms in a shelter house near the beach; at the next corner, a man tinkered with a seemingly stalled car, whistling tunelessly. Sontag gave no sign he knew they were here.

He cut abruptly into a vacant lot, across a neighborhood handball court, up an alley and came back to Rhea's place. He'd no more than gained it, when the lights flashed out. A dark wrap hugged about her, the girl came out, looked hastily up and down the deserted beach-side street.

Sontag, keeping to the deeper shadows, went after her. If he was aware the two men in the shelter house came out, crept after him, that the man with the stalled car did the same, he gave no sign.

The girl reached the end of the street, left the walk and cut across the salt grass of the slope. She reached a high gate in

the wall encircling the big house, called softly. The gate opened and she passed through. There was the sound of a lock being clicked on the other side.

Sontag circled the wall. On the far side, where there was a space clear of vines, and no rustling sounds to betray him, he made his try. He gained the top of the wall in a leap, poised momentarily, dropped over.

He wanted to curse his luck. Water splashed, soaking him to the skin. To hell with the designer who placed that fish-pool there!

In the darkness inside the wall, a darker shape came hurrying. "Damn cat, after them goldfish again," the man grumbled.

Sontag bellied down in the pool.

"Scat, you son!" the man rasped.

Sontag leaped, his pistol flailing. A hoarse croak, the sudden crack of the pistol barrel on a bare head. And that was that. A patch of moonlight fingered over the wall. Sontag dragged the man into it, rolled him over.

"Limey Tate!" Sontag grunted. "Now, there's no doubt at all that Rabon Tarrant is Kiroe Mock!"

Shivering, his clothes plastered to him, he crossed the yard and tiptoed across a flagged patio. A doorway thrust itself darkly against the cream-colored stucco of the house. Carefully, Sontag tried an ornate knob.

"Yeah?" The sound came harsh, muffled from the other side.

"'S me,—Limey," Sontag grunted.

The knob turned from the inside. Sontag thrust with all his weight. The man on the other side of the door was flung back, the heavy door striking him on the nose. He gurgled, clapped a hand to his face, then toppled as Sontag struck.

Sontag caught him, eased him down. Moving carefully in the dark hallway, he felt his way along. He stiffened, then. From somewhere, deep in that maze of rooms, came a shrill scream, an oath, another wailing sound . . .

RHEA, passing through the gate, was met by Kiroe Mock. He took her arm, escorted her through the hall, through the library, into a room in the middle of the house. He was thankful to the owners from whom he'd leased the place, for this almost soundproof room.

He shut the door, turned to Rhea.

"And now, Miss Grier," he jeered, "we'll have a little party of our own."

The girl, despite her tan, turned almost pale.

"Hell, yes," Mock laughed. "I know you. Just the same as you have guessed who I am. When you caught me with my glasses off this morning, on the beach, you really knew, eh?"

"From mannerisms ascribed to you, also. And by the fact I looked through book catalogues. There are no books signed by Rabon Tarrant."

"That was a weak point," he admitted. "But now, that I've got Wyatt's money, and then got the diamonds back *too*, I can move, get another identity. By the time your dumb G-Man friend wakes up, you and I will be gone. But first, I'm going to see if you are worth taking along, or not."

She backed slowly away. "G-Man?" she echoed.

"Why, surely; your Mr. Lance Sontag, the supposed artist."

Dazed, Rhea Grier shook her head. She had thought Sontag one of Mock's men; had gotten him to the house, then sent him to town, that he might not recognize her, be here when she came!

"You—"

He foretold the question. "When your brother, Custom Border Patrolman, Ed Grier, had the temerity to try to stop us at the Arizona border, a year ago, we were bringing back yellow cargo. Naturally, we couldn't let him hold us up. So we simply shot him.

"It's a good thing to know who you shoot, so we searched him. There was a letter in his pocket, and a picture. 'From Rhea, Your Loving Sister', it said on the picture. Naturally, I knew you the first time I saw you on the beach, after I came here."

"That's fine," Miss Grier almost screamed. "And now—"

She reached under her wrap. Kiroe Mock, laughing, leaped and struck. The girl hit the floor heavily, the little gun she'd grabbed for, falling away from her. Still laughing, with an insane sound to it, Mock stooped, grabbed a handful of her clothing, jerked with all his strength.

The girl cried out, tried to crawl toward the door.

Mock grabbed her, lifted her and held her, as easily as he would have held a child. While she fought, he slowly ripped her dress. His fingers, hot, wriggling like snakes, tore the thin material to shreds. Then gripping her skirt, he held it while he flung her half across the room onto the Monterey couch against the wall.

He held the bit of silk aloft, like a flag of victory, flung it from him and came crouching, moving slowly toward her. She leaped, tried to slip past him.

A HOARSE growl breaking past his lips, he picked her up and threw her back. His hands—steely, surprising in their terrible strength, played over her

arms, ran down to her waist. He grasped one of her ankles, bent her leg up and thrust the knee hard onto her own stomach.

His breath was hot, foul in her face

*Sontag's gun
was in his hand
now; he twisted,
shot, shot again.*



and he leaned above her . . . She screamed her terror then.

"I'm sorry for you, Mock, you forgot to lock the door!"

Mock stiffened. Slowly, slowly, he released Rhea; slowly, his breath loud in the now silent room, he turned,

"Damn you—Sontag," he groaned.

His hands wavered upward under the threat of Sontag's gun.

"Move over here," Sontag snarled. Slowly, Mock sidled toward him.

"He hurt you, Rhea?" Sontag grated, still not understanding her part in this.

"Not—not the way you mean," she whimpered, pulling a Navajo rug around her like a sarong.

"Not like you'll be hurt. Drop that gat, you nose-bustin' louse!"

Sontag winced against the press of a gun muzzle against his spine. His hand opened, his gun dropped to the floor. Slowly, carefully, he turned, to stare into the bloody, swollen face of the man he'd left lying in the hall.

"Hold him, Ivor," Mock ordered unnecessarily, retrieving his own gun. "When I get through with the dame, I'll turn her over to you."

He cocked the gun, carelessly swinging it arm's length before him. It came level with Sontag's face. Crouched against the wall, Rhea Grier trembled and shut her eyes.

"Step back, Ivor," Mock growled.

Huge, battered, the man called Ivor stepped back into the open doorway.

"Got anything to say, Sontag?" Mock snarled. "I had you guessing this morning, didn't I? Fool! Wouldn't have shown to you at all, only I'm ready to pull out. We'll take a load of Chinks to Los Angeles, and go on east. Some diamonds, too."

"I'm glad—" Sontag turned his head toward the girl— "I felt is wasn't you killed Wyatt." He looked back at Mock.

"Well?"

COOLD sweat ran off Sontag. Bells rang in his ears, and the muzzle of that gun seemed like the Cascade Bore. He focused his eyes on Mock's trigger finger.

"Huh!" Mock snapped. The finger tightened. Sontag fairly flung himself off his feet. The bullet aimed at his head, sped over him. That had been Mock's mistake.

Again the gun sound roared and rocked the room. A bullet smashed into the floor as Sontag rolled, reaching for his fallen weapon. Another gun thumped and added concussion to the din.

Ivor came stumbling into the room, tripped over Sontag, took the next bullet Mock had intended for him. Something warm and red sprayed Sontag as Ivor fell beside him.

Sontag's gun was under his hand. He twisted around, shot, shot again. His second bullet caught Mock beneath the chin, ranging upward. . . .

Squatting still, Sontag turned toward the door; to the two men who'd been in the shelter house; the one with the supposedly stalled car.

"You mugs come all the way from Los Angeles to help me, and damned near get here too late!" he snapped.

"We got that monkey," one of them said, aiming a toe at Ivor. "And there's another one we found sneaking into the house. He wouldn't fight." Regretfully. "We got him handcuffed to a stone bench in the patio."

Three pairs of eyes turned toward Rhea Grier.

"Never mind!" Sontag snapped. "Search the place."

They went away. Sontag, mopping at his hands and face with a wet handkerchief, to remove red, sticky spots, sat down beside the girl.

"Explain it," he gruffly commanded.

"Simple," she quavered. "My brother, Ed Grier, was killed on the border. He was a Customs man. I studied pictures, records of Kiroe Mock, after it was ascertained he had killed Ed. The bullet—"

"I know. I got one that come out of Wyatt. Fired from the pet pistol Mock always used."

"Well, when I learned Mock was supposed to be in these parts, I—"

"Hunted the beach. You met me, there was a fight, and later a killing. You suspected I'd be in with Mock, so you tried to pump me. Wanted me to be away from here tonight. Well, I suspected you. But I didn't want to—"

"Neither did I want to suspect you," she said in a small voice.

THE three Government agents came back.

"There's a safe in there. Have to get a man to open it. Guess those rocks will be in there. And there's ten Chinks in the cellar."

"Take care of things," Sontag ordered.

Rhea clutched her blanket around her. Sontag led her from the room.

"Lucky stiff!" one man exclaimed.

As they walked across the yard and toward the beach, Sontag said: "Then our posing for me, all of it was just a pump me for information—you thinking I was with Mock?"

"Not all of it was that. But you, you just wanted me to pose because you thought I helped kill Wyatt—"

"Look at the moon on the ocean," Sontag interrupted.

They sat down in the warm sand.

"I feel dirty. A swim would help me," he offered.

"Let's." Her eyes were starry.

They swam, side-by-side, far beyond the cove. They came back, lay in the moonlight, side-by-side. One of her little hands came over, nestled in his.

"Y—you're strong," she offered.

He reached over, gathered her to him.

The waves lapped the beach; a night-bird flapped overhead. The moon seemed to smile. There were, then, no other sounds. Save, just once. A girl's gasping voice named Lance Sontag then.

"Gee, man!" she sighed.

SILVERSCREEN SPECTRE

(Continued from page 39)

"Then, tonight, Barry Barkis showed up at your son's house. You recognized him as the man who had been Vesta's lover. So you shot him with the very gun you've got in your hand now!"

"Ja. He had despoiled my son's home. I killed him the virst chance I got!"

I nodded. "That's the way I figured it. But I had to pin it on you. So in your hearing I mentioned Carlotta as the key to the mystery. That made you scared of Carlotta. You realized she must be the one who was wrecking your son's movie; and you thought maybe she might spill something to incriminate you. Not knowing how much she knew, you determined to come here and kill her to keep her from talking. Isn't that right?"

"Ja. But you said you vas going downtown virst. I thought I vould have time—"

I said: "Sure. That's what I intended for you to think. You did as I expected—and now you'll spend the rest of your life in jail . . . unless they decide to hang you."

"Nein!" she screamed. Then, suddenly, she squirmed out of my grasp, ran to the parapet. Before I could stop her, she leaped far out into space; went hurtling downward. I heard her scream—just once. After that there was nothing but silence.

Dave Donaldson turned away. He coughed in his throat. I felt a little funny myself. I went back into Carlotta's boudoir—and after Donaldson left, I stayed around a while with Carlotta to get my mind off what had happened.

Carlotta managed to make me forget, after a while.



MURDER MAGIC

(Continued from page 51)

Bulotti? You're insane, aren't you? But that won't save you! And you murdered the girl—attacked her, too! They'll burn you for that!"

"He liked the sight of the blood. He wanted to do something spectacular so while the girl danced he hung the head, suspended it above the still quivering body!"

Softly, "Didn't you, Bulotti? It looked fine, didn't it? Dripping gore, running blood!"

NOBOLES broke in. "Very pretty, Johnny. You say you have this on your hip. What motive did the killer have?"

"Money," said Johnny softly. "The killer himself was only a tool. Another man paid him to commit the murder. Rapinee had a jewel worth much money. Find it and you find the killer."

"Where did you put it, Bulotti," sotto voce again. The Italian rolled his eyes, licked at his lips.

"And Rapinee had something else worth much money. Rapinee had been blackmailing a party in this household. That party was to pay him last night for the return of eleven letters. Rapinee had them. The person had the money. The man that hired the killer wanted one or both. He was desperately in need of money himself. He paid the murderer to do the killing but the insane killer forgot to search for the letters or the money!"

His voice sank to a whisper. "Didn't you, Bulotti? The blood was so red.

so pretty! You forgot everything else!"

"That's enough," Marshall Fitzhugh said warily. "I killed him, Nobles. He was blackmailing my wife just as Harding says. She came to me, told me and I killed him. Harding is mistaken about everything but the blackmail angle. I came in through the window—"

"Tell him he lies, Bulotti. Tell him it was you!" Johnny roared the words.

Bulotti leaped to his feet, spittle trickling down his mouth. The pupils of his eyes expanded until they seemed etched on the white eyeballs themselves. He swung a hard fist against Johnny's jaw, staggering him. He dove for the window, but Bill Noble's slug tore into his shoulder, dropped him to the floor.

HARDING said, "He killed Rapinee. The only place on the island that has a grindstone is his tool shop. He sharpened the death scimitar, came in through the window, and cut off the mystic's head. After Fitzhugh sent him for help, he sank the boat, committed another murder then hit himself in the head to divert suspicion. He killed Sheila because he or the man behind him was afraid she wasn't fully under the influence of hypnotism. Bulotti assaulted her because the sight of warm red blood excited him. He's insane. You can read it in his eyes."

Dead silence. Johnny cleared his throat. He laid a package of letters and a sheaf of bills on the table. "The murder was committed for these, Bill. I learned last night that a certain guest

here has promised to back Rita Fitzhugh in a musical comedy. I happen to know that guest is broke, that he's run through a sizeable fortune and has spent part of his business partner's money. I checked on that this morning."

Only the sound of strident breathing filled the room. Johnny grinned cheerfully at Rita.

"Through little Miss Dimwit there,



*Horrified, Johnny kept the light on her.
It was the body of Rapinee's assistant!*

this guest learned that Thalia was being blackmailed for about thirty grand for some love letters she wrote in a moment of weakness. The payoff was to be last

night. This gentleman determined to get the letters or the money. He hired Bulotti to do the job for him. But he didn't know Bulotti was a blood killer! Either Bulotti or the master mind got the jewel Rapinee always wore in his turban. I—"

A new voice broke in. Over near the mantel Carl Amherst glared at Rita and said, "You damned dumb little fool! So it was you that spent the night with Harding! And I thought it was Thalia!" Every eye was on the paunchy little man. His eyes glowed with strange fires, his teeth were bared in a snarl of hate. "That's what I get for playing around with a nitwit! You're right, Harding, if it gives you any satisfaction. But

you're lucky, you stumble on things. I had Bulotti do it all, even crack you on the head. I wish he'd have killed you! But, oh well—"

He shrugged. A small gun whipped up in his hand. Nobles and a uniformed policeman dove for him but the muzzle disappeared into his mouth, his finger tightened and a muffled sound rang out. As he fell, smoke poured from his mouth.

Presently Rita Fitzhugh touched Johnny on the shoulder. As he turned, she slapped him, hard. There was no sorrow in her eyes, only anger.

"Damn you," she said, "now who's going to back my show?"

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

(Continued from page 27)

until its cruel point was embedded in the soft flesh of a trembling breast. A tiny worm of blood crawled from the wound, trickled down across the hillock onto the table. The woman shrieked in agony. Strawn tottered to his feet.

"Stop it," he screamed.

Tomano whirled. Hempfer turned slowly. His voice was calm, even. "Strawn, I'm sorry you're into this. Tonight I'm getting revenge for a lot of things and it's unfortunate for you that you're mixed in, for I want no witnesses. I warned you once today, but this Jezebel persuaded you. Now they've killed my daughter, and they must pay the price. An eye for an eye. I'm sorry for you, Strawn. Take him, Tomano."

The squat negro started forward on cat feet, the knife gleaming in his hand.

Spittle dripped from his drooling lips unheeded. Sinew and muscle played beneath the ebon of his perspiring skin. Strawn crouched to meet him breathing a prayer to the God of battle. The squat negro leaped.

THE lights went out as Strawn dropped to his knees, felt his assailant's body stumble and fall over him, felt the breeze from the stabbing knife as it hissed by his ear.

Seemingly stunned the negro lay on his face in the darkness. Fighting for his very life Strawn was on him. The man regained his senses, twisted and turned beneath the detective. Strawn felt the bite of the knife against his knuckles, twisted with a great effort, and heaved with his entire weight. The knife met

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flesh, slid home with a sickening sensation. The negro screamed, a scream that ended in a gurgle. His muscled body relaxed. Slowly, nauseated, sickened Strawn got to his feet in the darkness. Off in the distance he heard the wail of a police siren. Suddenly the lights came on.

In the doorway by the switch stood Maureen Hempfer, the tweed coat gaping open to disclose her youthful sensuous loveliness. With a little cry of fright she ran to her father who was leaning with one hand on the huge table, the other clutching his heart. She was heedless of all the alluring flesh, rounded breasts, enticing hips, so carelessly exposed.

"It's all right, daddy, it's all right. I've called the police! I was afraid and hid in the garage, waiting for Mr. Strawn to come back. Then I heard screams and came in to—"

The huge bulk of her father tottered and fell with a crash to the floor. Someone banged at the front door. Strawn went to let the police in.

Minutes later he stood before the fireplace with his arm about the quivering shoulders of the girl. "So that's that," he said. "The stepmother and her lover

were planning two murders so they'd inherit the entire estate. Mason was going to give Hempfer some sort of drug to make it look like heart trouble. Well, it looks like it backfired on them."

White as a sheet August Hempfer sat in a chair beside the library table. One pudgy hand still clutched his breast. His wife cowered across the room from him, a policeman hovering over her. A physician raised up from the form of Dr. Mason, which still lay on the table.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there'll be two murder charges. This man is dead."

Mrs. Hempfer threw back her head and laughed the laugh of a demented woman. "You'll burn the same as I!"

Hempfer raised his great head like a stricken pit bull. His smile was not pleasant to see. He turned slowly toward Strawn. "You know," he said slowly, "the only place Mason was right was about my heart. Strawn I want you to take care of the baby, will you? I don't think I'll ever have to stand trial for the murder of my wife's lover!"

Strawn tightened his arm about shapelessly shoulders as the bulldog head sank lower and lower on the immense shirtbosom.

BULLETS AT BLEDSOE'S

(Continued from page 77)

you not to run with gangsters!" he said grinly.

Kitty went to him, touched his arm. "Oh, Dan—Dan—" she choked. "Steve isn't a gangster! He's a G-man!"

Steve smiled. "She's right. I'm a Federal dick. I wormed my way into the Peterson mob to get the goods on them

regarding the peddling of dope in this state. Peterson was at the head of the narcotic racket. I collected plenty of evidence against him—enough to send him up for life. But now . . . well, you've saved Uncle Sam the expense of a trial."

Dan Doran stared. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said. Then he smiled. "My

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men captured the rest of the Peterson mob downstairs. So I guess we've cleaned out the whole nest, eh?" He went to the door. "I'll go down and check up on things. You two can follow, soon as Kitty gets some clothes on her . . ." Dan went out.

And then Steve turned to the girl who had risked her honor for his freedom. "My dear—" he whispered. "We'll be married tonight. Now that my job is done, I have a vacation coming to me. We'll use it for our honeymoon."

She shrank back. "N-no, Steve. Not after . . . what happened. Not after I allowed . . . Peterson to . . . make love to me . . ."

Steve took her in his arms. "That only proves how much you loved me, my sweet," he said gently. "I intend to spend the rest of my life repaying you . . . with kisses!"

She nestled against him, and her firm breasts were flattened on his chest. "Start now!" she commanded shyly. . . .

The CARNIVAL NIGHT MURDERS

(Continued from page 15)

"No. Hanna Brown knew the lipstick was too bright for street use. It was a shade that went only with a scarlet gown and Brown knew Stewart was saving the gown for tonight."

"Anything else?"

"I gave the murderer a chance to get the lipstick. But every woman here knew of the dope. They tried to get it. It will hurt the sorority plenty, you know that. It was a secret none dared confess, the dope, I mean. Stewart had too many involved."

"Anything else?"

"A telegram in code. They figure, I suppose, that I'd try to decipher it. That would give Brown more time to get the lipstick."

White got up.

"Chris," he said, "this was a nice, neat job under bad handicaps. You deserve your promotion even if you are only twenty-eight. I'll retire soon. And I'll plug for you."

"Thanks, inspector."

White went out. The house seemed dismally silent now. Chris had a smoke and another drink. Inside he felt sort of hollow and empty. Lela Mills! What a woman! It wasn't much fun being a bachelor with a woman like that around. He sighed.

"Hello!" said a voice and he couldn't believe his ears.

He turned. There she stood.

SHE had on a black satin evening gown that sheathed her slenderness and moulded her small breasts. Her platinum blonde hair refracted the light a million pin points of dazzling flame. Her bare shoulders were superb, white, gently sloping. He sucked in his breath.

"I'm sorry for treating you so mean," she said, "but I was so afraid you'd find out about the dope."

"That's all right."

"Tonight all the sororities pitch in and have a dance. The girls invite the men. Would . . . would you care to go?"

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"Would I care to go?" he echoed in disbelief. "Would I?"

"I guess you would," she smiled. "It sounds that way."

"I'll have to go to my apartment and change."

"I'm ready."

They had a drink and went to his apartment. There she walked around examining the place.

"I like it very much," she announced.

"I like you very much. I'd like to keep you here."

"You . . . you mean?"

"I mean I love you. I want you—for keeps."

The blue eyes narrowed.

"I'd like that, Chris. I'd like that awfully much. I want to stay here with you—for keeps."

Then she was in his good arm and he was kissing her. And her lips were so soft and warm as he'd dreamed they'd

be. And her body against him was supple and firm and very, very warm. He felt dizzy, happy, blissful, all choked up inside.

The phone rang. Dazed, he answered it.

"Good work, Chris," said the chief. "You'll move up fast. Coming down and make a report?"

"Not yet, chief. I . . . I'm uncovering a new angle."

He hung up. Lela's eyes had darkened to a midnight blue.

"When you going to start on this angle, Chris?"

"Lela, honey, I have a bad paw."

"I have two good ones."

"But the dance?"

"Lasts until morning. And I'm not so certain that we'll get there at all."

That proved an accurate prophecy. They never got to the dance at all.

PAY OFF, OR ELSE—!

(Continued from page 97)

"Damn it, Myrtle!" I said hoarsely.
"You show up at the damndest times! I got to go to Chicago—tonight!"

"Take me along," she breathed, jamming herself close against me.

After all, I'd had my eye on her for some time. I dropped my head, kissed her. Her lips slithered moistly, meeting my own. For a moment, I gave up to the terrible thrill of her nearness.

Then I pushed her away. "Can't take you!" I gulped. "Got to hurry."

Stumbling into my bedroom, the first thing I did was to catch a peep from the window. Habit. It overlooked the street. And, speaking of thrills, I got one then!

Three floors below, at the opposite curbing, a dark sedan was loitering.

Not by accident, either. Two and two—four. Myrtle Lang, a feminine singer . . . for me. In a pig's eye! Mertz had more than underestimated me—he'd insulted me. I should breeze out on my way to the train, Myrtle on my arm, and have the boys in that car now me down like so much wheat!

Mertz couldn't have known I'd decided on that western sleeper. But he might have guessed I'd go—sometime soon. That made Chicago very hot. On the other hand, wiping me off the slate might just be routine. Sort of like slapping down a troublesome fly.

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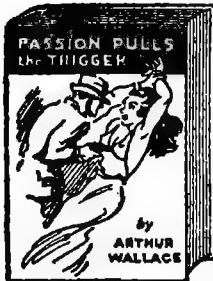
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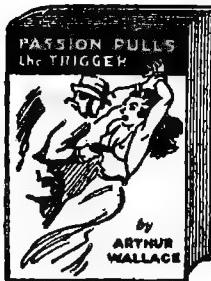
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It didn't take long to pack my overnight bag. Hefting it to the living room, I saw Myrtle standing by the radio, hands on her hips, nearly all of both heavy breasts free of the loose robe.

But I asked thinly: "Why not send the lugs home to bed?" jerking a thumb toward the street. "They'll catch cold out there waiting for me."

I got a big kick out of the way she gnawed on her under lip. Downright disgust. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said sullenly.

I grinned at her. "Well, baby—" I began, and the phone bell finished it for me. I grabbed the receiver, said: "Faulkner!"

"Shorty . . . !" Doris Mercer's voice. "Can you meet me right away?"

I thought about my guards, but said: "Sure. . . . Where?"

"Fred Tasker's apartment!" she almost gasped. . . . And slapped the receiver in my ear.

SUDDENLY, I was all up in the air. I didn't know why—maybe it was the excitement crackling in Doris Mercer's tones. I sort of felt things were getting ready to happen. Often I've had those hunches, more often right than otherwise.

Myrtle was regarding me sharply. It gave me a bright idea.

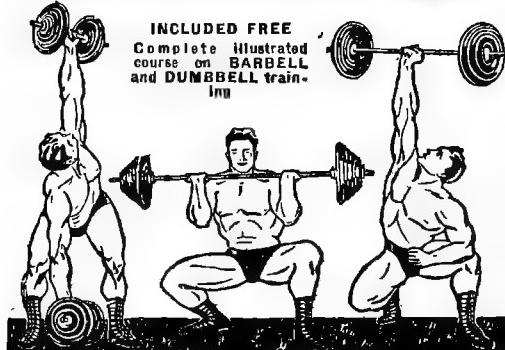
"I'm going calling," I told her. "But not to Chicago."

She laughed nastily. "Like hell you are. Walk out of here, and you'll stop enough lead to sink the Normandie."

"That's why you're going along," I said softly. "You'll make a nice front."

"You can't do that to me, Shorty!" she screamed. "I'll be killed!" Her melon-shaped breasts quivered to her frantic pleading.

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I didn't remind her that I would be knocked off if I ankled outside. I was thinking how she'd look with bullets riddling the whiteness of her body, ripping the tender flesh of those breasts, reddening her. And it wasn't so pleasant, even though she'd been all set to put the finger on me.

And then . . . another idea. A dizzy one, but the best I could do.

Moving fast, I got my bracelets out. She fought, cursed—but I slammed her on the bed and hooked her to the uprights. Then I began to get dressed all over again.

In Myrtle Lang's clothes!

It took some minutes, even though I'm no giant. I had to cut the toes out of her hose, slit the sides and backs of her slippers. I kept on my own underwear, wriggling into a blue and white woolen dress. Because of a little too much embroidery and shoulders, more slitting was necessary.

Fortunately her fur trimmed coat fitted—but only if I didn't take a deep breath. The hat . . . Felt, fortunately, and not one of those goofy pie plate specials. I yanked it down to my eyes, so my hair and ears wouldn't show.

I didn't go for any make up, though. Sticking my .38 between the folds of the coat, I pranced over to the bed.

"Hiya, toots!" I called to the trussed Myrtle, in soprano. "Think you could go for me if you were a gent?"

She didn't answer. But, believe me—the unbridled, savage hate that crazed her eyes was enough. . . .

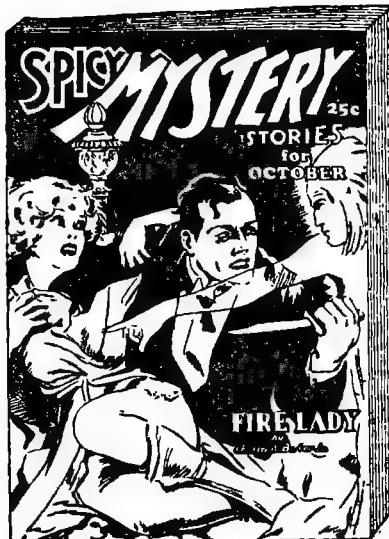
I hit the street with Myrtle's fur collar all the way up, struck out on a straight line to the parked sedan. At any moment, I expected to hear the ungodly chatter of gunfire, to feel the plunge and tear of bullets. Walking was torture.

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Closer, and I spotted two boys in the front seat. All eyes.

I knew they were trying to figure it out. Maybe they recognized Myrtle's set up; maybe not. I don't even know whether or not my pansy strut was enough like the McCoy. Chin down, I reached the driver's side of the car and laid my rod across the top of the door.

"Out—you guys!" I barked. "Hands at your shoulders!"

They did, silently. Their expressions, though! Mentally, I was being run through a meat chopper. Circling the front of the sedan, I gave them a fast fanning. Luckily, the cold street was practically deserted.

I got a total of four roscoes, which I tossed into the sedan.

"Up the street, muggs!" I ordered. "And . . . eyes front!"

I gave them a few yards start. Then I got under the wheel and went past them in second. . . .

TH E late Fred Tasker had lived in an apartment house with walls done in pinkish stucco. Nobody that was nice people hung up their hats there. Even if it did take dough.

A dingy night clerk was nose deep in a detective story magazine as I wobbled past. He didn't bother looking to see who.

The place was strictly walkup and I did two flights. My dogs were barking out loud. Looking for C-8, I rounded a corner . . . and there it was. I raised my knuckles to rap and didn't.

A man's voice was distinct through very thin door panels.

"Let's have that stuff!" it growled, "before I commence to get rough."

A woman replied, high strung, desperate. "No . . . ! They belonged to Fred—to me!"

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Chalk Mertz and Doris Mercer. . . .

I took out my gun, ripples of cold fever chasing up and down my arms and legs. This ought to be good!

Mertz was speaking again, his voice now a grinding line of tone.

"What the hell of it? Holman's got me where the hair ain't so long, sister, and that stuff of Tasker's will fix him for all time. If you think I'm gonna let you hang on to it so I can't slap the lug on him, you're screwy. . . . He'll go to the can if it gets out. But I want him so he'll jump when I yell frog. . . . Let's have it!"

Doris, throbbing voiced, cried: "You can't, I tell you! Fred took months to get this dope. It'll prove Holman's been stealing my money for years. He's going to catch hell like he made Fred do!"

"Nuts, sister!" Mertz snarled. "I'm taking that stuff . . . !"

And then Doris screamed with pain.

If the door hadn't been unlocked, I'd have blasted a bullet through it. But it was. . . . I busted on in, skirts slowing me up and getting in the way.

"Fade, Chalk!" I snarled.

He did. He'd been manhandling Doris as I'd entered. I saw where he'd torn her dress in front, so much that one puckering, miniature breast was almost exposed. Sight of it drenched me with love for that girl, murderous hate for Mertz. I ripped off Myrtle's hat, watching both of them get a wallop of surprise.

"Shorty . . . !" Doris gasped. "Oh—you're just in time!"

I smiled swiftly, reassuringly, at her. Then I looked at Mertz.

"I could burn you down right now and get away with it!" I grated. "But—you'll live to fry for knocking off Fred Tasker!"

A bubbly, queer cry was wrung from

Doris. I didn't take my stare from Chalk Mertz, he wasn't any softie. And he looked mean enough right now to chew nails.

Then, abruptly, he was laughing.

"You nutsy!" he jeered harshly. "What the hell would I be smacking him down for? He and me was in the same racket."

"Phooey!" I told him. "You wanted that dope to make Holman dance. Tasker was getting it together for Doris." I was just repeating what I'd overheard, not knowing what it was they had been discussing. "So—you bumped him."

"I tell you—"

"Swallow it!" I snapped. "Or I'll give you a going over for sending that broad of yours after me to lay the finger on me."

Mertz screwed up his sea gull's face in bewilderment. Then slowly: "I don't deal in broads, mister. In my racket, they're no dice."

"You ever hear of Myrtle Lang?" I flung at him.

Mertz blew up. "Myrtle Lang! Why—she's Holman's! He's the guy who must've—"

Gunfire from the doorway. . . .

Concussion rocked the room. A bloody hole miraculously was in Mertz's throat, dead center. Then he was going over backward as if from a mule's kick. Doris Mercer's shriek knifed apart the shot's booming resonance. Mertz crashed to the floor.

All this before I could move. The swiftness of it had lashed me fast, preventing me from turning and using my own rod. Then I whipped about. . . .

"Drop it!" Holman snarled, just inside the doorway.

And shot the gun out of my hand.

Doris yelled again. Terrific pain, shock

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flung my arm to my side, there to hang like a limp eel. I couldn't even feel my other hand when I started to rub it.

"Okay, Doris!" Holman growled swiftly. "Hand over that dope you and Tasker were working on. . . . Fast,—it!" His meaty face was gray, horrible.

"You—you knew we were getting it?" Doris asked, almost in a whisper, eyes tragic, incredulous.

"A hundred percent right!" Holman clipped, lips drawn. "What's more, I knew he'd flopped for you. So—he was no more good in my book. I been looking all over hell for that stuff, you two-timing little—!"

IT ALL washed over me like sea waves. It was so astounding, yet now so simple, I spoke before knowing it.

"You knocked off Tasker, Holman," I said dreamily, practically thinking aloud. "That Chicago bookie stuff was a phoney. A better alibi I never heard of, but now—just crap! You sent Myrtle to find out how much I knew—after I said I might know who was mixed up in it. The second time you wanted me clipped so I couldn't ever go to Chicago and find out all this business was just another one of your good things."

"He . . . killed . . . Fred?" Doris whispered hoarsely.

Holman, lancing both of us with hate-filled eyes, sneered. "A wisenheimer and a cheap tart. I'm gonna burn down—"

I lunged forward at that, low.

In the whisker of time before I reached him, his gun roared over my head. I realized he'd hit Doris. From the corner of my eye, I saw her being hurled back. She made no sound. And then I lost sight of her.

I smacked into Holman hard enough to floor an ox.

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He went down, all right. My hundred and forty pounds had popped him like two hundred. I could feel his fat belly winging in with the impact. There was a sucking whoosh of breath. And then I was all over him, coat and skirts giving me hell as I hammered down at his bloated face.

He didn't have a chance. I stopped finally because he wasn't moving under me. I stood up, ripping off Myrtle's coat. His face, looking distortedly at the ceiling. Blood moving across his mouth. Dimly I realized that my right arm still was limp and useless. Wow! I'd shellacked him with one hand! What if I'd had them both!

A slight, sobbing whimper poked my hearing—*Doris. Alive!*

I whirled, picking her off the floor and carrying her to a sofa. Her eyes were shut and she was white as a sheet. But—alive! My heart raced.

"Baby!" I breathed down at her.

I saw, then, that Holman's bullets had snarled through the flesh of her upper arm. I ripped off Myrtle's dress, my undershirt, using the latter to wind around the wound. She was okay until I could get a doctor.

Dimly the sound of a siren. . . .

I fell to my knees beside her and she opened her eyes. They fluttered, wandered, finally settling on my face.

"Shorty. . . !" she breathed, smiling through her pain. "Don't ever leave me . . . you're all I have—now—"

That got me. Slipping my one good arm tenderly beneath her, I felt the softness of her strain toward me. She tried to raise her head, lips parted. . . . I caught her mouth. Desire, longing, burned hotly there, drowning me with fierce ardor. How I loved that girl!

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